

# The Effects of Early Voting on the Electorate in Allen County, Indiana

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Indiana is part of a growing trend in the United States to make voting more convenient. The hope is that making voting more convenient will result in greater participation by voters. Research on the effect of these changes is in its infancy. This project seeks to address three questions. First, are early voters making up an increasingly larger percentage of all voters? Second, do the profiles of in-office voters match the profiles of other non-precinct based voters? Third, is there a relationship between how close someone lives to the early vote site and casting an in-office vote? The findings demonstrate that Hoosiers are warming to early voting. The findings also show that there are some predictable similarities and differences between early voters and other voters. Finally, this project finds a surprising relationship between the distance voters travel to cast a ballot in-office.

Depending on who is asked, voting in neighborhood precincts on Election Day is either an exercise in community building, a fact of life that contributes nothing to and takes nothing from our lives (other than selecting our leaders), or is a deterrent to voting. Making it more convenient to vote is believed to be one of the ways to revitalize our democracy. One of the new methods designed to make voting easier in Indiana is in-office voting in the days leading up to Election Day.

This research seeks to address three questions. First, are early voters making up an increasingly larger percentage of all voters? Second, do the profiles of in-office voters match the profiles of other non-precinct-based voters? Third, is there a relationship between how close someone lives to the early vote site and casting an in-office vote?

United States citizens are not participating in elections at the same rate as they have in the past. Voter turnout in Indiana for the 1972 presidential election<sup>1</sup> was 70 percent.<sup>2</sup> The turnout in 2008 was 62 percent.<sup>3</sup> That was an increase from the 58 percent who turn out in 2004<sup>4</sup> and the 55 percent who turned out in 2000, but still well below the 1972 to 2004 average of 69 percent and far below the modern-day high of 80% in 1964.<sup>5</sup> The republican form of government in the United States can work only if citizens participate.

Although Hoosiers have more opportunities to vote than voters in many other states and countries, we do not vote often enough that voters remember the procedure from one election to the next. Significant and/or frequent changes to the voting system can frustrate some voters and discourage them from participating. This means that changes designed to make voting more convenient and increase turnout

could actually have the opposite effect. Early voting in Indiana is a relatively recent change and its effects on turnout are not clear. Also, voting behavior is learned from parents, guardians, and role models. Disenchantment with government and the electoral process has caused some people to stop participating and that has been passed on to the generation after them. If the new reforms cause additional disenchantment the result could be a continually dwindling electorate.

Many things could be done to increase turnout such as adding Election Day registration, opening the polls earlier and closing them later, expanding Election Day to more than one day, or moving voting to Saturday and Sunday. Other methods that are being employed more frequently than those listed above include adding early voting sites, no-excuse absentee voting, and the utilization of regional voting sites that allow voters to vote in a place other than their home precinct. Scholars hypothesized that early voting would increase turnout by reducing the resource demands of voting (McDonald and Popkin, 2001; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Texiera, 1992; Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980). This research has been taken to heart by legislatures and election administrators. According to The Early Voting Information Center at Reed College,<sup>6</sup> 31 states allow no-excuse early voting and 28 states allow no-excuse absentee voting by mail. Four states and the District of Columbia allow early voting if the voter can provide an excuse for not being able to vote on Election Day. It has been hypothesized that implementing changes like these not only will improve turnout but also will lower the cost of administering elections. In Indiana, early voting still is a new concept. It was first made available statewide in 2006.

There is no doubt that making voting more convenient through early voting sites, no-excuse absentee voting, and the utilization of regional voting sites is where election administration is heading. Since many of these changes to make voting more convenient have been made rather recently, there is not much research that explores the effects of the changes. We do know that voters are making use of these convenient methods. Fourteen percent of the votes cast in the 2000 presidential election were cast early and by 2004, the figure jumped to 22 percent (“Often Voting Early,” 2006). Gronke, et al., (2008) found that early voting accounted for more than 30 percent of all voting in some states. Scheele, et al., (2008a) found that one third of all ballots cast in Indiana counties that offer multiple early voting sites were cast early. In 2008, at least 29,000,000 people voted early (Intorcio, 2009a). In North Carolina more than 40 percent and in Colorado almost 65 percent of the people who voted, voted early (Intorcio, 2009a).

The research on how convenient voting methods are affecting voter turnout is less conclusive. Kropf, et al., (2008) found that early voters and Election Day voters were basically the same and that campaigns to get people to vote early had a limited effect on mobilizing new voters or persuading voters to change their minds. The findings of this research were similar to research from the mid- to late-1990s that found that there were some differences between early voters and Election Day voters, but the differences were slight (Stein, 1998; Verba, Schoozman, and Brady, 1995). Early voters were more interested in politics and more partisan than Election Day voters. Not surprisingly, the elderly were more likely to use early voting, but surprisingly, lower-income voters also were more likely to use early voting. Additional research in the late-1990s and this decade found similar differences between early voters and Election Day voters (Gronke and Toffey, 2008; Karp and Banducci, 2001; Box-Steffensmeier and Kimball, 1999). Early voters have higher overall levels of campaign attentiveness; political motivation; and are generally more active, engaged, and participatory.

Stein (1997) and Richardson (2001) showed slight increases in overall turnout when early voting was offered. Owens, et al., (2005) found that electoral reforms were likely to have only minimal effect on turnout if voters were not encouraged to vote by political elites. In contrast, that same year, Gronke, et al., (2005) found that early voting in Florida in 2004 had a significant effect on turnout among “low-propensity voters.” When Gronke, et al., (2007) took a longer historical view, the optimism that early voting was increasing turnout and bringing new voters into the system disappeared. They found little evidence that any reform other than vote-by-mail in Oregon had more than a minimal effect on turnout. Fitzgerald (2005) found that turnout was less about convenience than expected. Dyck, et al., (2005) and Gimpel, et al.,

(2006) found that geography and word of mouth from peers may be the driving factors in early voting and turnout more generally.

After the 2008 election, Electiononline and Michael McDonald found that 17 states that allowed early voting saw an increase in overall turnout and 15 states saw a decrease in turnout (Intorcio, 2009b). Perhaps the most accurate statement about the effects of early voting came from Scheele, et al., (2008b) who concluded that having early voting and regional voting centers in Indiana did not encourage or discourage turnout.

Based on the research done thus far, it is possible that early voting is – or is not – helping to increase voter turnout. It also is possible that early voting may, or may not, be doing anything but providing those who are more politically engaged with more options for when they will cast their vote.

## DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Indiana began using an electronic statewide voter registration system (SVRS) in 2006. Data is entered into the SVRS on the county level. In compliance with the Indiana Access to Public Records Act (IC 5-14-3), each county may provide their portion of the statewide list of registered voters to candidates, political parties, and others. A request for the Allen County portion of the electronic records was submitted to the Allen County Voter Registration Board in December of 2008. Requesting the data in December made it possible to include voter activity from the 2008 presidential election. At the time of the request, the SVRS had the voting history for each voter from 1996 through the 2008 Presidential election. The records were provided in five separate electronic files. There were discrepancies between the files that made it impossible to determine the exact number of registered voters. The files were joined together using Microsoft Access to create a list of the registered voters in Allen County as of December 31, 2008. A total of 254,245 records were included in the data file for this research.

The data used from the SVRS was limited to each voter’s precinct location, date of birth, gender, and voting history. The voting history included the frequency with which each voter has participated, the voting method chosen by each voter (e.g. precinct-based vote, in-office vote, or mailed absentee ballot), and the party primary in which the voter participated. Each voter’s history was used to determine the average number of primary elections and general elections in which voters had participated.

There are three terms that need to be defined. The first is non-precinct-based voting. This means casting a vote before Election Day by any method other than voting in a home precinct. The vast majority of the non-precinct-based early votes are cast by mail or in the

offices of the Allen County Election Board, but also may include being voted by a travelling board or being an overseas voter. The second is mailed ballot. Voters may request a ballot be mailed to them and then they can mark the ballot and mail it back to the Allen County Election Board before Election Day. The third is in-office voting. These are votes cast in the offices of the Allen County Election Board before Election Day. This was the only location for in-office voting in Allen County from 2006 through 2008.

A map with concentric circles every quarter of a mile radiating out from the offices of the Allen County Election Board in the City-County Building in Fort Wayne was used to determine the direct linear distance from the center of each precinct to the early voting site.

This analysis was looking for differences in voting behavior for the entire population of registered voters in Allen County. Descriptive statistics and t-tests were used to analyze the data and examine hypotheses dealing with the convenience factor of in-office voting, who is utilizing in-office voting, and the effects of distance on the utilization of in-office voting.

## HYPOTHESES

There are five hypotheses that will be tested by this project. The first hypothesis deals with the effects of making voting more convenient. Specifically, this hypothesis is that making voting more convenient through the provision of in-office voting has resulted in non-precinct-based voters making up a larger percentage of all voters. The second through fourth hypotheses deal with who utilizes in-office voting. The second hypothesis is that those who vote regularly are more likely to vote in-office than first-time voters. The third is that older voters are more likely to cast non-precinct-based votes than younger voters. The fourth is that male non-precinct-based voters are more likely than female non-precinct-based voters to cast votes in-office. The final hypothesis addresses the effects of distance on in-office voting. Specifically, this hypothesis is that non-precinct-based voters living closer to the in-office voting site are more likely to vote in-office than those living further from the location.

## FINDINGS

Indiana has offered an early voting option since 2006. This means that early voting has been available for three primary elections, one mid-term election, one municipal election, and one presidential election. There are significant differences between these elections. Those differences could affect the utilization of early voting methods, but given the limited number of elections that have had early voting as an option, the analysis will start by looking for a general trend for all elections. Please note that Tables 2 through 14 can be found in the appendix to this article.

**TABLE 1. Change in Non-Precinct-Based Voting and In-Office Voting (2006-2008)**

	Number of Voters	Percent of All Voters Voting Someplace Other Than Precinct	Percent of All Votes Cast In-Office
<b>Primary</b>			
2006	36,400	5.69	2.29
2007	25,821	6.19	2.21
2008	83,101	10.61	6.02
<b>General</b>			
2006	87,164	9.05	2.44
2007	55,991	8.72	2.80
2008	152,729	20.11	12.73

The Effects of Making Voting More Convenient. Table 1 demonstrates that in primary elections, non-precinct-based voters are making up a larger percentage of all votes casts. This is not true for in-office voting during primary elections. Between the 2006 primary and 2007 primary there was a decrease in the percentage of all votes coming from in-office votes (2.29 to 2.21) and then an increase in 2008 (6.02). The trend for general elections is different. There was a reduction in non-precinct-based votes from 2006 to 2007 (9.05 to 8.72) and then an increase in 2008 (20.11). There is continuous growth for the percentage of general election votes coming from in-office votes (2006 = 2.44; 2007 = 2.80; 2008 = 12.73).

Regular Voter Utilization of In-Office Voting. Although it is small, there is a statistically significant difference between those voting in their first primary election and those who have voted in at least two primary elections when it comes to non-precinct-based voting (See Table 2). Those who have voted in at least two primaries were slightly more likely to cast a non-precinct based vote than first-time primary voters. The trend is different when in-office voting is examined specifically. Table 3 includes data for voters who voted by a non-precinct-based method. In the 2006 and 2007 primaries, voters who have voted in at least two primary elections were more likely to vote in-office than voters voting in their first primary. The result was reversed in the 2008 primary when first-time primary voters were more likely than other voters to cast their vote in-office. The results from in-office voting in the 2007 primary were not statistically significant at the .05 level.

For general elections, the results are different. There is less conclusive evidence regarding non-precinct-based voting (See Table 4). In 2006 and 2007, it appears that first-time general election voters were

more likely to cast a non-precinct based vote than voters who have voted in at least two general elections, however neither result was statistically significant at the .05 level. The results for the 2008 general election were statistically significant and showed that the number of general elections in which the voter had voted did not matter.

Table 5 includes results for voters who voted using a non-precinct-based method. The results for in-office voting in general elections were more conclusive. In 2006 and 2007, voters who had voted in at least two general elections were more likely to vote in-office than voters who were voting in their first general election. In 2008, the trend was reversed and first-time general election voters were more likely to vote in-office than other voters.

It should be pointed out that 2006 and 2007 first-time primary voters made up 6.2 percent and 5.4 percent of the voters and 5 percent and 4.8 percent of the non-precinct-based voters. In 2008 the percentages jumped to 44.5 percent and 38.7 percent. For general elections the trend is the same with a drop from the 2006 to 2007 election (1 percent to 0.8 percent of the voters; 3.1 percent and 1.8 percent of the non-precinct-based voters) and then a substantial increase in 2008 to 22.8 percent and 22.5 percent.

Old Voter Utilization of Non-Precinct Based Voting. In primary and general elections, voters 65 years old and older consistently were more likely than voters 18-64 years old to vote via a non-precinct-based method. In Table 6, both age groups can be seen to have steady means in 2006 and 2007 and then large increases in non-precinct-based voting from 2007 to 2008.

Given that Indiana law allows for voters 65 years old and older to vote by mail by virtue of their age, it is important to compare these age groups on this type of non-precinct-based voting. Table 7 has the results for non-precinct-based voters voting by mail. Voters 65 and older are much more likely than voters younger than 65 to cast mailed ballots.

Not surprisingly, the ease with which a person 65 or older can cast a mailed ballot does affect the utilization of in-office voting by these voters. Table 8 shows that voters 18-64 years old are more likely to cast votes in-office than voters 65 and older. The 2008 elections had the highest participation in non-precinct-based voting methods for the three years examined.

Since the political parties and campaigns have been known to target voters 50 and older with the mailed ballot campaigns, the upper age category was expanded to 50 years old and older. In Table 9 it can be seen that the older age category still is was more likely to cast a non-precinct-based vote than the younger age category. As was expected, the mean for voters 65 and older was greater than the mean for voters 50 and older.

When the method of non-precinct-based voting is examined based on the expanded upper age group, it can be seen that the older group still is more likely to cast a mailed ballot than the younger group (See Table 10) and the younger voters are more likely to cast a vote in-office (See Table 11). The diminishment of the differences between the groups regarding non-precinct-based voting continued when the different types of non-precinct-based voting were examined.

Male Voter Utilization of In-Office Voting. Table 12 shows that female voters were slightly more likely to cast non-precinct-based votes than male voters. From the 2006 primary to the 2007 primary, female voters showed a very small increase in utilization of non-precinct-based voting while males remained constant. Both groups saw fairly large growth from 2007 to 2008. In general elections, both males and females saw no change from 2006 to 2007 in utilization of non-precinct-based voting methods. Just like with primary elections, both saw a fairly large growth from 2007 to 2008.

Among non-precinct-based voters, male voters were more likely than female voters to cast their vote in-office. Both genders showed a decrease from the 2006 primary to the 2007 primary and then a sizeable growth from 2007 to 2008. The pattern was different for general elections. Both genders showed growth from 2006 to 2007 and from 2007 to 2008. In the 2008 primary and general election, females closed the gap between male and female voters' use of in-office voting (See Table 13).

The Effects of Distance on In-Office Voting. Table 14 shows that voters who lived more than the average linear distance from their precinct to the in-office voting site consistently have been more likely to cast their vote in their precinct than voters who live less than the average distance. In the case of primary and general elections, the likelihood of casting a non-precinct-based vote was virtually unchanged regardless of the distance to the in-office voting site. In the 2008 primary election, there was a small increase in the utilization of non-precinct-based voting by both groups. In the 2008 general election, there was a large increase especially among voters living less than the average distance.

The findings are different and surprising when the non-precinct-based voters are examined. In the 2006 and 2007 primary and general elections, voters who lived more than the average distance were more likely to vote in-office than voters who lived less than the average distance. Only in 2008 was the hypothesized relationship found.

The likelihood voters who lived more than the average distance from the in-office site held steady from the 2006 primary election to the 2007. They saw

a sizeable increase from 2007 to 2008. For general elections, they showed a consistently upward trend. For voters who live less than the average distance, they saw a decrease from the 2006 primary to the 2007 primary and then a substantial increase from 2007 to 2008. For general elections, they showed the same upward trend the voters who live more than the average distance showed (See Table 15).

## DISCUSSION

There are three factors to mention that cut across more than one of the hypotheses. The first is that the 2007 Republican primary for mayor of Fort Wayne<sup>7</sup> featured an upset victory by an insurgent candidate who relied heavily on a grassroots campaign that did not include campaign professionals. The circumstances surrounding the victory reduced support for the Republican candidate in the general election. The novice nature of the campaign staff and volunteers also could have meant that they were not aware of or effective at organizing an early voting or mailed absentee campaign. The second is that the 2008 election featured campaigns that were characterized by very carefully organized efforts to get people to vote early. The third is that Indiana was considered a toss-up state in the race for president. In fact, the Democratic presidential candidate won Indiana for the first time since 1964 and for only the fourth time since 1920. This generated attention that Hoosier voters were not used to and helped increase turnout. These three factors are possible explanations for many of the findings that did not fully support the hypotheses or exceeded expectations. This helps to underscore the fact that campaigns and candidates do matter in the electoral process.

There is an interesting finding that cuts across the different variables examined in this research. The in-office mean for almost all categories is not as large in general elections as it is in primary elections. This likely is explained in part by Indiana's primary election laws. Voters have to declare a party affiliation at the primary and that becomes a matter of public record. Voters who are willing to do this are more committed partisans and so may be better informed about the option.

The Effects of Making Voting More Convenient. The data did not show a consistent upward trajectory for voters using non-precinct-based voting. One possible explanation for the decrease in the percentage of all votes being cast in-office in the 2007 primary and by mail in the 2007 general election and the sudden rebound in 2008 likely come from the campaigns. In 2007 there was a prominent campaign that was not well organized and not run by campaign professionals. By contrast, 2008 featured one of the best organized campaigns in recent memory.

In spite of the dip in 2007, the data shows that non-precinct-based voters are becoming a larger percentage of those voting and the trend does not seem to be affected by the type of election. It is very likely that we are seeing an upward trend in the utilization of early voting because it does reduce the resource demands of voting. The 2010 primary and midterm elections will be more telling about the trend for early voting options. It is important to remember that campaigns that generate a great deal of excitement and put resources into concentrated efforts to maximize early voting may result in greater increases in early voting than the trend would predict.

Regular Voter Utilization of In-Office Voting. It is assumed that regular voters are more likely to know about early voting than new voters because of their exposure to the process as regular voters and because they are more likely to be targeted by campaigns for political mobilization. The results seem to bear this out, but the interesting finding is that in 2008 the pattern among non-precinct-based voters was broken. In 2006 and 2007 primary and general elections, first-time non-precinct-based voters were less likely to vote in-office than voters who had voted in two or more elections. In 2008, the majority of first-time voters voted in-office and these individuals were more likely than other voters to do so. That same year saw a significant increase in the number of first-time voters. Much of this likely was caused by the aggressive push to mobilize young and disenchanted voters by the Obama campaign and their efforts to get those voters to vote early.

Old Voter Utilization of Non-Precinct Based Voting. Indiana law allows for voters 65 years old and older to vote by mail by virtue of their age. For years, campaigns and political parties have been targeting these voters with mobilization efforts to get them to vote by mail before Election Day. The efforts of the campaigns and political parties often have extended to voters as young as 50. Given the legal requirements for casting an absentee ballot by mail and the efforts of the parties and campaigns, it is more likely that older voters would cast votes by mail than younger voters and that younger voters would be more likely to vote in-office than older voters. The findings support this.

There is a consistent upward trajectory for young people to make use of in-office voting. A good question to ask next is whether this increase is unique to young people or if it just a sign of the overall increase in in-office voting. The data shows that older voters are not contributing much to the increased use of in-office voting. Given that the law does not allow voters 50-64 to vote by mail just by virtue of their age, it is logical to assume that the likelihood of a voter casting an in-office vote would increase when the age category is expanded from 65 and older to 50 and older; the data supports this idea.

Male Voter Utilization of In-Office Voting. Females were more likely than males to cast non-precinct-based votes, but the difference is minimal. The difference likely is attributable to the larger percentage of women who are 65 and older. Women make up 58 percent of the voters who are 65 or older and 54 percent of the voters who are 50 or older. These age groups were more likely to cast mailed ballots than younger groups. The more interesting finding for this hypothesis is that females have seen a large increase in in-office voting. The growth was so great in the 2008 general election that females were more likely than males to vote in-office for the first time. That year both genders were more likely to vote in-office than by mail for the first time since in-office became an option in 2006. Once again, this likely is due to the aggressive early voting mobilization efforts of the Obama campaign and the general excitement about Indiana being in play.

The Effects of Distance on In-Office Voting. These findings appear to be counterintuitive. In 2006 and 2007, non-precinct-based voters who lived further from the in-office voting site were more likely to vote in-office than non-precinct-based voters who lived closer to the site. One possible explanation for this is that there is a large percentage of the population living in urbanized areas which are further from the in-office voting site than the mean. For these voters, a longer commute may be the norm and the drive to the in-office voting site may not be a deterrent. However, when the distance from the in-office voting site was changed to incorporate most of the urbanized area of the county, the results did not change in a discernable way. Another possible explanation comes from the geography of Allen County. It is a large county in terms of land mass and the residents in rural areas are quite used to driving to and from most places. In fact, most of them would have had to drive to their polling place on Election Day and the more flexible schedule of the in-office voting may have appealed to them.

In presidential and midterm elections, it is not uncommon for the majority of votes to come from voters living more than the mean distance from the in-office voting location.<sup>8</sup> However, voters living more than the mean distance from the in-office voting location have never made up the majority of non-precinct-based voters. This supports previous research.

## CONCLUSION

This research makes interesting contributions to our understanding of voter behavior regarding different methods of voting. First, we know that voters in a general election are more likely to use non-precinct-based voting methods than they are in the primary election. Second, we know that in four of the six elections reviewed, first-time voters were less likely to use in-office voting than voters who had voted in two or more elections. In the two elections (2008 primary and

general) when first-time voters were more likely to cast in-office votes than other voters, they also made up a much larger percentage of the total votes cast than in any other elections. Third, voters who are eligible to cast mailed absentee ballots by virtue of their age (65 years or older) are more likely to cast non-precinct-based votes than younger voters. Their preferred method is voting by mail with never fewer than six out of ten of them casting their vote by mail. If the age range is expanded to 50 years and older, the results are similar, but not as definitive. Fourth, women are more likely than men to cast a non-precinct-based vote, but males are more likely to cast their non-precinct-based vote in-office than women. The gap in non-precinct-based voting does not seem to be changing over time, but the gap for in-office voting does seem to be closing. Finally, distance does seem to matter when it comes to deciding to cast a vote in a home precinct versus a non-precinct-based vote. Surprisingly, when voters who live more than the median distance from the in-office voting site decide to cast a non-precinct-based vote, they are more likely to choose the in-office option.

One of the assets of this research is that the actual voter file was used, but there are several ways the research could be advanced. First, this project compared precinct-based voters to non-precinct-based voters and then compared the types of non-precinct-based voters to each other. A complete comparison of the different types of voters is in order. Second, the voter file contains limited information. Census data should be incorporated into the data file. While it would be inappropriate to assume that the demographic characteristics that the Census data could provide should apply uniformly to all voters, it would be appropriate to investigate the relationships between that demographic data and the various methods of voting. Third, it would be ideal to incorporate polling data with the Census and voter file.

A final conclusion to be drawn from this research deals with the administration of elections. Election administrators strive to make elections fair and open to all voters. In some instances, state law will limit how fair the administration can be. However, when the law does not limit election administrators and administrators decide to try to make voting more convenient, the administrators should be careful to make these more convenient methods equally available to all voters. One way to do this would be to use analysis similar to this research to determine if the ways they are offering non-precinct-based voting seem to have any obvious biases that should be addressed.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Thanks in no small part to the efforts of Indiana Senator Birch Bayh, 18 year-old citizens of the United

States were given the right to vote by the Twenty-Sixth Amendment to the United States Constitution in 1971.

<sup>2</sup> Indiana Election Division (<http://www.in.gov/sos/elections/voters/electronicIndex.html>) accessed on April 27, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Information updated on February 21, 2008 and accessed on August 6, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Fort Wayne was the largest jurisdiction holding an election that year. It contains more than 72% of the population of Allen County.

<sup>8</sup> The 2008 primary is the only exception to this.

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