

Ballots in the balance

ELECTION TURNOUTS, OUTCOMES MIGHT HINGE ON CITIZEN CONVENIENCE





A POLITICAL
SCIENTIST
EXPLORES HOW
VOTERS RESPOND
WHEN ELECTION
OFFICIALS MAKE
IT MORE OR LESS
CONVENIENT TO
GET TO THE POLLS.

When millions of people cast votes in an election, a single ballot might not seem to count for much. In recent years, though, U.S. presidential candidates have run such tight races that the outcome has turned on a handful of votes in a single state. Think of George W. Bush's 2 percent margin in Ohio in 2004, or his much smaller — and highly controversial — margin in Florida in 2000.

As the 2008 presidential primaries wind down and the general election draws near, memories of past elections point out the fact that in a close race, every vote really does matter. That's why the losing side in a squeaker contest might challenge the accuracy of the tally, the performance of voting machines or the handling of absentee ballots, not to mention any factors that might have kept some voters from going to the polls.

And it's why election officials would like to push voter turnout as close as they can to 100 percent. "The outcome of a high-turnout election is perceived as having greater legitimacy than one with low turnout because the voters are presumed to be more representative of the entire population," said John E. McNulty, assistant professor of political science at Binghamton University.

A good deal of McNulty's research seeks to define the circumstances that boost or depress voter participation. In 2006, McNulty and Henry E. Brady, professor of political science and public policy at

the University of California, Berkeley, received \$165,000 from the National Science Foundation to expand their work in this area.

McNulty and Brady have been examining how voters respond when a county reduces the number of polling locations used in an election. They're developing a book on the subject, which should help election officials understand how decisions to open or close polling spots will influence turnout.

"They'll know exactly what to expect when they make any changes," McNulty said. "In addition, when they open new polling places or have any kind of voter outreach, they'll have a pretty good idea of how much additional turnout that might generate, so they can be better prepared for it."

A major assumption behind the study is that when you change a voter's polling place, you make voting less convenient. Inconvenience is one of many elements that make up the "cost" of voting. In



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general, the cost of voting includes any opportunity a voter gives up in order to cast a ballot — perhaps the chance to play with one's children, take a shorter route home from work or watch a rerun of a favorite television show.

When people decide whether to vote, they do a cost/benefit analysis. And for many of us, the direct benefit of voting is not too compelling. "In many cases, you don't perceive that the outcome of the election will have a tangible effect on your life," McNulty said.

"When you take that cost into account, versus the potential benefits, in purely mathematical terms, nobody *should* vote. Because there's more value to you in sitting down and watching an episode of *Seinfeld* than there is benefit, in thin rational terms, in casting a vote at all," he said. It's not the expectation of benefit, but other factors, such as a sense of duty, that make many citizens overlook the costs and head for the polls.

McNulty's and Brady's initial research sprang from the 2003 special election that recalled California Gov. Gray Davis and put Arnold Schwarzenegger in his place. "Running a statewide election in a state the size of California costs a for-

tune," McNulty said. And in this high-profile contest, with famous actors, a porn star and the former commissioner of Major League Baseball on the slate, high turnout was likely to push the price tag even higher.

Because it was a special election, though, with no contests for city council, county supervisor or the like, every voter in the state would be looking at exactly the same ballot choices. Since counties didn't have to tailor ballots to local needs, in theory an individual could vote anywhere. Counties could save money by opening polls in fewer locations.

Los Angeles County, the state's largest, cut the number of polling places from about 5,000 to 2,000. "This saved something on the order of \$10 million," McNulty said.

But while it cut expenses for the county, that decision created another kind of "cost" for about 3.6 million registered voters who would have to cast their votes away from their accustomed polling places. Examining election records after the fact, McNulty and Brady found that this inconvenience factor did keep some voters away.

People who had to go to an unfamiliar polling place, they determined, were 3 percent less likely to turn up at the polls than people who could vote where they always did. Of the 3 percent who didn't make the trip, about half took advantage of California's liberal absentee balloting laws to vote by mail. "The other half abstained. So you had a net turnout drop-off of about 1.5 percent," McNulty said.

The NSF-funded book will extend this study with research on elections held in Los Angeles and several other California counties, plus selected locations in other states, including New York, from 2002 to 2006. McNulty and Brady will compare the turnout that counties saw when they employed the standard number of polling places and when they tried to save money by opening fewer polls.

Those comparisons are relatively easy to make in California, which held another statewide special election in 2005, this time on a slate of ballot initiatives. For that contest, Los Angeles County again opened only about 2,000 polling sites, McNulty said. During regular elections in 2002 and 2004, it employed its typical complement of roughly 5,000 sites.

McNulty and Brady also hope to pinpoint how changes in polling places affect specific groups of voters. "We'll be able to isolate old from young," McNulty said. "We'll be able to isolate a long-term voter from a short-term voter. We'll be able to isolate the frequent voter from the occasional voter. And, making some inferences from geography, we can make judgments about relative effects on different socio-economic strata." Information for this analysis comes from voter rolls, which include addresses, birth dates, party registrations and voting histories.

With this breakdown, the study could have implications for efforts to get college-age voters to the polls, an effort McNulty terms “one of the great white whales of political consultants.”

For the future, McNulty plans to investigate early voting. This practice, legal in more than half the states, allows people to vote in advance of Election Day, using systems set up in public locations such as shopping malls. Some observers believe early voting increases turnout by making it easier to vote; others think it cannibalizes Election Day voting, attracting mainly people who would have voted anyway, and leaving overall turnout unchanged, McNulty said.

McNulty plans to study whether offering early voting in different kinds of locations might increase turnout. “There’s some indication that putting polls into places like Wal-Mart might not be a cannibalizing initiative,” he said.

While not everyone frequents traditional malls, in some communities just about everyone shops at Wal-Mart. “And if you happen to be there and there’s not much of a wait, it seems like it would be fairly costless to vote,” McNulty speculates. “I want to find out if that’s true, and if so, what difference it makes.” ■

— Merrill Douglas



John McNulty