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Voter Opinions about Election Reform: Do They Support Making Voting More Convenient?

R. Michael Alvarez, Thad E. Hall, Ines Levin, and Charles Stewart III

ABSTRACT

We study public opinions about convenience voting reforms, using a unique state-by-state survey conducted in the 2008 presidential election. Our analysis of the American voting public’s support for convenience voting reforms provides a variety of important insights into the potential direction of innovations in the electoral process in the near future. First, we find that the most prominent convenience voting reforms have mixed support. These include attitudes toward automatic voter registration, Election Day voter registration, and moving Election Day to a weekend. These reforms do not have majority support among all voters nationwide, but some enjoy majority support within some states. Second, we find that Internet voting and voting by mail do not receive a great deal of support from American voters. There is no state in which a majority of voters supports Internet voting, nor are there states where expanded vote-by-mail has majority support (other than states which have already implemented these reforms). Finally, we find that an overwhelming majority of Americans support requiring showing photo identification and a bare majority support making Election Day a holiday. Support for reform is highly correlated with political affiliations and attitudes, and especially correlated with support for Barack Obama.

Over the past 150 years, the elections administration in the United States has changed considerably. The eligible population has more than doubled, as race, sex, and residency qualifications have vanished and the voting age has been lowered. States have adopted practices to guard against voter intimidation and to ensure that votes are cast away from the prying eyes of parties and candidates (see Bensel 2003, 2004). Voting systems have changed to the point that most ballots in the U.S. are counted, if not cast, by computer. Voter registration has been instituted and, after a century of being highly restrictive, reforms are making the registration process much more convenient for potential voters (e.g., Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Keyssar 2000). The time period during which voting is allowed has been expanded, and absentee voting has become increasingly common. In short, voting is now easier for more people than ever.

If reformers have their way, these will not be the last of the changes in how Americans vote. For instance, in 2001, the National Commission on Federal Election Reform proposed that Election Day be made a national holiday (Carter and Ford 2002). Congress recently passed a law to facilitate participation in 2005. Congress recently passed a law to facilitate participation

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1There is a lengthy literature regarding the evolution of elections in the United States. For three overviews, see Ewald (2009), Keyssar (2000), and Saltman (2006).
by overseas and military voters. States continue to debate adopting reforms like Election Day registration (EDR) and instant runoff voting (IRV). These, and many other reforms, aim at making the voting process easier and more convenient for voters.

Viewed generally, the long list of reforms currently being considered by Congress and state legislatures cluster around three general types of change. First, some reforms are intended to make voter registration easier. These include efforts to promote a national voter registration system or to institute EDR. Second, there are efforts to reform the voting process, by eliminating or reducing costs associated with going to the polls on Election Day. Such efforts include allowing remote voting over the Internet, instituting all vote-by-mail elections, and reforms to move Election Day to a weekend or make it a holiday. Finally, there are efforts to increase the integrity of the voting process by requiring voters to authenticate themselves more rigorously before they vote. The best known of these efforts would require that voters show government-issued photo identification at the polls.

Most of these changes have been difficult to enact, and in many cases subject to strong debate. The slow pace of election reform in national and state legislatures has many causes, including the low salience of election reform in the face of other governing crises, the inertia of elected officials who have succeeded under current electoral rules, economic factors, and uncertainties about the political consequences and political costs of each reform.

The factor we focus on in this article is public opinion. Based on data derived from a unique national survey, we show that a major hurdle many election reforms face is public opinion. Only one prominent reform proposal, requiring photo identification, is supported overwhelmingly nationwide. Other reforms—reforms that aim to increase convenience—at best divide the public, and are generally opposed by them.

To paint with a broad brush, nationwide policymaking tends to correspond with mood shifts among the public. With that in mind, this article characterizes public opinion about prominent election reforms. Our goal is two-fold. First, we describe the degree of nationwide public support for a variety of commonly discussed election reforms. Second, we identify geographic, demographic, and political correlates that predict support. In general, we find that registered voters are the most supportive of a prominent reform that is believed by many to make voting more inconvenient: requiring voters to show photo identification at the polls. Registered voters are somewhat less supportive of efforts to increase voting convenience by time-shifting the vote, and much less supportive of the introduction of new digital technologies into voting. Convenience-related reforms that have already been adopted in a few locations, such as all-mail voting, are supported where they have been adopted and opposed elsewhere. Finally, reflecting the heightened partisanship of election administration in the past decade, we find that partisan identification has a strong influence on opinions about photo identification, which has been the most intensely contested of the reforms we consider.

We use data from a unique survey about the conduct of the 2008 presidential election. It consisted of a sample of 10,000 registered voters, 200 from each of the fifty states. The survey was in the field immediately following the election. It was conducted via the Internet, but in the interest of cross-validating these results, a parallel survey was conducted in ten states, with the same instrument, using telephone sampling.

**BACKGROUND**

During the work of the National Commission on Federal Election Reform (known as the “Carter-Ford Commission”), President Jimmy Carter noted that an election system can be judged by its ease and convenience: whether it is easy to register to vote, easy to vote, and easy to count the votes. Var-

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2This provision was included in the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2010 (PL 111-84).

3Whether or not these various types of election reform actually make the process more convenient, or whether they increase registration and turnout rates, are the subjects of lively debate. See Fortier (2006), Gronke (2008), Gronke, Galanes-Rosenbaum and Miller (2007, 2008), and Kousser and Mullin (2007) for examples of this debate.

4See, for example, Gronke, Galanes-Rosenbaum, and Miller (2007) for a discussion of the lack of clarity regarding the costs associated with early voting for election administrators and Gronke et al. (2008) for a discussion of how early voting has affected the costs of campaigning.

5For a review of the literature regarding how public opinion affects policymakers and their decision-making processes and decisions regarding policy priorities, see Jones and Baumgartner (2005). For a discussion of these dynamics at the state level, see Erikson, Wright, and McIver (1993).

6One of the authors worked for the Commission. This comment was made during a meeting of the Commission members.
ious reforms to the electoral system in the United States have been proposed to achieve this goal, and some have been implemented. For example, the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA, also known as “Motor Voter”) was passed in 1993 with the goal of making it easier to register to vote. The Help America Vote Act (HAVA) also reformed voter registration systems in the United States, required the use of provisional ballots as a “fail safe” method to guard against registration glitches, and encouraged states to modernize their voting systems by getting rid of outmoded technologies, such as punch cards, and using newer optical scan or electronic voting technologies. The NVRA and HAVA are both examples of national-level reforms to the electoral process, enacted by Congress to make the voting process more uniform across the states and more convenient.

National reforms have the advantage of promoting uniformity of election administration, ensuring that all individuals have the same rights and ability to participate in the electoral process, regardless of the state in which they live. In many cases, national election reforms are critical because the government wants to achieve a broad goal, such as enfranchising populations of voters nationally, as was done through the Voting Rights Act.

Yet, the history of election reforms, especially those that promote procedural ease in voting, has more commonly unfolded at the state level, with states implementing changes to their election laws to address particular political concerns and desires of their populations for innovation. As Ewald (2009) notes, election laws are idiosyncratic to states, reflecting the preferences of a state at a particular time when they were enacted, but not necessarily updated to reflect current practice or preferences. In many cases, election laws have been changed in order to secure specific partisan advantages (Keyssar 2000).

Absentee voting, one convenience voting procedure, is an example of how states have implemented election laws quite differently. Absentee voting was first used in the United States during the Civil War; its use and the state laws governing it have evolved over time (Harris 1934; Alvarez, Hall, and Roberts 2007). Some states, such as Massachusetts and New York, have very restrictive absentee voting laws. Other states, such as California and Washington, have adopted very liberal, no-excuse absentee voting laws. These differences presumably reflect the political calculations of state legislators, as well as public desires for reform. Absentee voting is not the only prominent election practice whose adoption seems associated with political culture and traditional practices interacting with the political calculations of state legislators. The adoption of restrictive voter identification laws in conservative states of the South and Midwest likely has both a partisan and cultural component to it as well (e.g., Alvarez, Bailey, and Katz 2008).

In general, the diffusion of policy can lead to regional or ideological clustering of policies across states (e.g., Karch 2007; Shipan and Volden 2008; Volden, Ting, and Carpenter 2008). This is especially true across states with similar political cultures and traditions, as has been found in the cases of economic development (e.g., Boeckelman 1991) and hate crime legislation (Grattet, Jenness, and Curry 1995). For example, the diffusion of expanded vote-by-mail elections has a strong regional focus, with west coast states adopting no-excuse absentee voting that some other states have subsequently adopted (Fortier 2006). However, the political sensitivity of legislators toward voter demands and their need to explain why they have adopted a new reform means that they consider public opinion in their decision-making processes (see Ray 1982; Kingdon 1989). Given the political debates that have occurred in the area of election administration since the 2000 elections, changes to the rules that govern elections have the potential to mobilize interests on either side of the political divide. These debates have occurred over such issues as which voting technologies states and local governments should adopt and whether voters should have to show photo identification at their polling place prior to voting.

We are interested in determining contemporary public support for three specific types of reforms,
two of which promote voting convenience. The first reforms concern the voter registration process. The United States is one of the few advanced democracies that does not proactively register voters (Powell 1986; Alvarez and Hall 2009). Instead, registration reforms have been recognized in the United States as being important for lowering the costs of voting, especially when the deadline for registration is moved closer to Election Day or eliminated entirely (e.g., Fenster 1994; Highton 1997; Knack 2001; Knack and White 2000; Rhine 1995, 1996; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980).

Two ways of making it more convenient to register are (1) to allow people to register at the polls on Election Day and (2) to automatically register all citizens over the age of 18. Nine states have adopted EDR over the past twenty years. Many interest groups have touted this reform as a way to ensure that all voters who want to vote on Election Day can do so. More recently, there have been discussions regarding how all individuals who are eligible to vote can be added to the registration rolls automatically, such as through the use of motor vehicle data and other related data sources (see Hasen 2005; Alvarez and Hall 2009).

The second set of reforms we study center on making Election Day itself more convenient. One way of making Election Day more convenient is to make it a holiday or move it to a weekend. Most European countries, for example, hold their elections on Sunday. The benefit of doing so is that it moves the election to a day when schools and other public buildings are not in use and many Americans do not have to work. In 2001, the Carter-Ford Commission suggested making the first Tuesday of every federal election year a national holiday. The Commission’s report argued, “Holding national elections on a national holiday will increase availability of poll workers and suitable polling places and might make voting easier for some workers” (Carter and Ford 2002, 40).

Another approach to making participation more convenient is to shift voting away from the traditional polling place by allowing voting over the Internet or voting entirely by mail. In the case of all vote-by-mail elections, ballots are sent to all voters, which in essence brings the polling place to their mailbox and kitchen table. The voter only has to fill out the ballot and send it back in the allotted time to participate in the election. Voting over the Internet, either at a voting location that has Internet voting kiosks or through an individual’s own household computer, has been used in the United States in primary elections and for overseas “UOCAVA” voters, in various Swiss cantons for their elections, and in the country of Estonia for recent national and local elections. Voting online arguably has the potential to make voting easier for individuals who have access to the Internet (Alvarez and Hall 2004; Alvarez, Hall, and Trechsel 2009).

The third set of reforms is intended to improve the security of elections and ensure that all voters are properly authenticated when they vote. Responding to concerns about vote fraud from mail-in voter registration forms, HAVA required that all first-time voters who register by mail present some form of identification when they first vote. Some states (notably, Georgia and Indiana) have gone well beyond the minimum HAVA requirement, by requiring all in-person voters to show officially issued photo identification. The efficacy of this requirement in reducing vote fraud has been disputed by a series of studies, but the Supreme Court decision in Crawford v. Marion County Election Board, which upheld photo identification requirements as a method of reducing perceived dangers of vote fraud, has prompted other states to consider this reform.14

10 Although it is often claimed that North Dakota does not have voter registration, it in fact does have a central voter registry and creates poll books for elections. As 16.1-02-03(2) of the North Dakota statute notes, “Any individual...who voted at either of the general elections in the two previous election years must be designated as ‘active’...[and] any individual...who did not vote at either of the general elections in the two previous election years must be designated as ‘inactive’ in the initial central voter file.” This central file is used to create poll books for the election, which are then supplemented by individuals who are added to the poll book on Election Day who were not previously in it, much as would be the case in an EDR state.

11 A discussion of Election Day Voter Registration can be found at <http://archive.demos.org/page18.cfm>.

12 See <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,4293353,00.html> for a discussion of this point in a discussion of the European Parliamentary elections.

13 Florida, Hawaii, Louisiana, Michigan, and South Dakota all request photo identification, too, but they allow voters without such identification to sign an affidavit and then vote. Georgia and Indiana require such voters to cast a provisional ballot and then later produce the identification before the ballot may be counted.

14 There is a growing research literature on the various impacts that voter identification requirements might have on voter perceptions, voting behavior, and the political process. For examples of recent published research, see for example, Ansolabehere and Persily (2008) or Atkeson et al. (2010).
In addition to making voting more convenient or secure, there are many administrative reasons why a given state or jurisdiction might adopt some of these reforms. For example, voting by mail might be adopted so that election officials no longer have to operate polling places, recruit poll workers, conduct training, and identify sites for polling places (Alvarez and Hall 2006). Likewise, as the Carter-Ford Commission noted, there may be many administrative advantages of an Election Day holiday. What we are interested in investigating, however, are the public’s attitudes toward these reforms and the factors that shape these attitudes. In the next section, we consider the individual level factors that shape public support for these reforms and identify the states in which each reform has the highest and lowest levels of support.

**METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN**

Our analysis of voter opinions about future election reforms is based on a set of seven questions about a variety of election reforms in the three areas we discussed above. The question posed to survey respondents asked, “Do you support or oppose any of the following proposals for new ways of voting or conducting elections?” Respondents were then given the chance to state whether they supported or opposed the following reforms:

- Allow absentee voting over the Internet.
- Move Election Day to a weekend.
- Automatically register all citizens over 18 to vote.
- Allow people to register on Election Day at the polls.
- Require all people to show government issued photo identification when they vote.
- Make Election Day a national holiday.

These questions were included in the context of a study of voter attitudes and opinions about election administration, the 2008 Survey of the Performance of American Elections. This first-of-its-kind survey was developed to provide a comprehensive national assessment of the experience with the electoral process in the 2008 presidential election. This survey, implemented the week after the election, had been extensively pilot tested in gubernatorial elections in the fall of 2007 (Mississippi, Kentucky, and Louisiana) as well as in the 2008 “Super Tuesday” presidential primary states. The survey interviews we use in this article were conducted online, with 200 interviews from registered voters in every state (yielding a total sample of 10,000 responses from registered voters nationally). YouGov/Polimetrix, using matched random samples of registered voters in each of the fifty American states, administered these interviews. Weights were developed so that on a number of demographic characteristics the samples matched the national demographic profile of registered voters. With these weights used, the external validity of the online survey results was quite strong: the state-by-state correlation between the Obama vote estimated by the online survey was strongly correlated with the actual state vote (0.94).

A telephone survey was also implemented, with a sample of 200 registered voters in ten states. These interviews were conducted using computer-assisted random digit dialing. The telephone survey provided an assessment of the online sample and survey response, and comparative analysis of the two methods produced a conclusion that overall the two methods produce results that are largely consistent. Our analysis makes use only of the responses of the large, national, online sample. A replication of our analysis using data from the telephone sample is available from the authors upon request.

The research design of our study is straightforward. We first present the response frequencies from the election reform questions. We also consider the response frequencies by state. Then, we examine these same response frequencies by a variety of theoretically-interesting covariates, including age, gender, race and ethnicity, income, homeownership, disability, education, partisanship, ideology, and 2008 presidential vote. Next, we examine how opinions about election reform are associated with voter confidence, and the method the voter used to cast their ballot in the 2008 election.

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15 The order of these reform questions rotated across respondents.

16 Complete details of this survey are available in the survey report, <http://vote.caltech.edu/drupal/files/report/Final%20Report20090218.pdf>.

17 The survey report summarized the results from this analysis by noting that there were observed differences between the online and telephone survey results, and that: “These differences between Internet and phone respondents offer reassurance and suggest cautions in using the data from the survey. Overall, the samples in both surveys are similar to the population as a whole and to each other in terms of demographics and political attitudes and behaviors” (Ibid, page 8).
Finally, in order to better understand which of these various covariates might have the most statistically robust relationship with each type of election reform, we use a multivariate statistical model that is appropriate for addressing two important features of the data we analyze, the binary nature of the dependent variable (supporting or opposing each election reform) and the fact that we have a dataset that is constructed from fifty state samples. That analysis confirms the strong role that partisanship plays in forming opinions about election reforms, and the relatively minor role played by non-political demographic characteristics, and even personal experience with the voting process.

SURVEY RESULTS

We present in Table 1 the simple survey frequencies, the weighted percentages of voters in our online sample who said they supported or opposed each of the seven election reform measures. The greatest support is for requiring all voters to show government issued photo identification when they go to vote, with 75.6% of respondents supporting this reform. There is more mixed support for changing voter registration in the United States, with only 48.3% of registered voters supporting automatic government efforts to register voters and 43.7% supporting EDR.

The two reforms related to making voting more convenient have different levels of support. We find that 57.5% of respondents support making Election Day a holiday but only 41.8% support the notion of moving Election Day to a weekend. The final two election reforms are received with the least enthusiasm. Absentee voting over the Internet was supported by roughly a third of the sample (30.1%), and voting by mail received even less support (14.7%).

Next, we look at the support for each of these election reforms by state in Table 2. There we see a great deal of variation in geographic support for each reform. Majorities in every state support rules that require voter identification in order to vote. Even in Massachusetts, where support is the lowest, 60.9% of registered voters expressed support. Support was highest in Hawaii (88.3%) and Indiana (84.8%). A majority of respondents in twenty-six states support government efforts to automatically register voters. New York, Vermont, and Michigan have the highest levels of support for this reform (60%, 58%, and 58%, respectively); seven states have support levels below 40%. Election Day voter registration has majority support in ten states, nine of which either already have EDR or lack formal voter registration.

There is also strong support for making Election Day a holiday. This reform fails to garner majority support in only seven states, with three upper Midwest states—South Dakota, North Dakota, and Minnesota—having the lowest levels of support. It is the most strongly supported in North Carolina and Delaware, with greater than 70% support. On the other hand, moving Election Day to a weekend garners majority support in only five states, with support in the most enthusiastic state, Louisiana, coming in at a tepid 55%.

Turning to the two election reforms that center on making participation convenient, we see that there is majority support for voting by mail only in the two states that already have voting by mail, Washington and Oregon. The last reform, voting over the Internet, has no majority support in any state. Support for voting over the Internet is 40% in two states, California and South Carolina. In nine states, support for voting over the Internet is below 25%.

In Table 3, we examine the bivariate relationship between support for these reforms and various individual attributes. Younger voters are generally in favor of reform, except for universal vote-by-mail and moving Election Day to a weekend. Women are more supportive than men for all reforms, except moving Election Day to a weekend, where men were more supportive, and requiring photo identification, where both sexes were equally supportive. Whites tend to be less supportive of reforms than blacks and Hispanics, except for requiring photo identification, where whites and blacks hold similar opinions, and Hispanics are slightly more supportive. Lower-income respondents are more likely to support absentee voting by Internet, universal vote-by-mail, automatically registering all citizens

| Table 1. Overall Support for Election Reform |
|---------------------------------------------|
| Pct. supporting   | N    |
|-------------------|------|
| Require ID        | 75.6 | 9,869|
| Make Election Day a holiday | 57.5 | 9,861|
| Auto-register all citizens to vote | 48.3 | 9,850|
| Election Day Registration | 43.7 | 9,950|
| Election Day to Weekend | 41.8 | 9,800|
| Absentee voting over Internet | 30.1 | 9,834|
| Vote-by-Mail      | 14.7 | 9,778|
|                | Internet Voting | Vote by Mail | Automatic Registration | EDR | Require ID | ED Weekend | ED Holiday |
|----------------|-----------------|--------------|------------------------|-----|------------|------------|------------|
| **Alabama**    | 28              | 6            | 48                     | 28  | 80         | 43         | 51         |
| **Alaska**     | 24              | 12           | 42                     | 32  | 79         | 45         | 49         |
| **Arizona**    | 39              | 32           | 43                     | 40  | 83         | 47         | 54         |
| **Arkansas**   | 31              | 10           | 46                     | 35  | 81         | 41         | 59         |
| **California** | 40              | 22           | 50                     | 44  | 75         | 48         | 57         |
| **Colorado**   | 28              | 24           | 51                     | 37  | 76         | 47         | 61         |
| **Connecticut**| 31              | 12           | 48                     | 43  | 72         | 44         | 57         |
| **Delaware**   | 28              | 11           | 57                     | 36  | 74         | 41         | 76         |
| **Florida**    | 30              | 17           | 50                     | 34  | 84         | 48         | 57         |
| **Georgia**    | 31              | 11           | 50                     | 41  | 83         | 42         | 60         |
| **Hawaii**     | 39              | 25           | 54                     | 45  | 88         | 52         | 60         |
| **Idaho**      | 24              | 14           | 44                     | 76  | 77         | 35         | 53         |
| **Illinois**   | 30              | 10           | 53                     | 38  | 78         | 39         | 60         |
| **Indiana**    | 32              | 12           | 49                     | 36  | 85         | 41         | 56         |
| **Iowa**       | 27              | 14           | 48                     | 61  | 73         | 38         | 53         |
| **Kansas**     | 24              | 7            | 35                     | 37  | 76         | 35         | 53         |
| **Kentucky**   | 27              | 7            | 45                     | 34  | 79         | 32         | 60         |
| **Louisiana**  | 31              | 11           | 43                     | 35  | 82         | 55         | 64         |
| **Maine**      | 24              | 14           | 52                     | 68  | 66         | 38         | 57         |
| **Maryland**   | 33              | 9            | 52                     | 40  | 73         | 38         | 69         |
| **Massachusetts** | 26         | 8            | 54                     | 46  | 61         | 44         | 55         |
| **Michigan**   | 38              | 15           | 58                     | 38  | 81         | 51         | 56         |
| **Minnesota**  | 25              | 10           | 52                     | 77  | 69         | 34         | 45         |
| **Mississippi**| 29              | 11           | 53                     | 31  | 75         | 36         | 58         |
| **Missouri**   | 29              | 13           | 49                     | 27  | 69         | 49         | 58         |
| **Montana**    | 31              | 23           | 43                     | 54  | 69         | 36         | 55         |

**Table 2. Support for Election Reform by State**

|                | Internet Voting | Vote by Mail | Automatic Registration | EDR | Require ID | ED Weekend | ED Holiday |
|----------------|-----------------|--------------|------------------------|-----|------------|------------|------------|
| **National**   | 30              | 15           | 48                     | 44  | 48         | 44         | 42         | 57         |
|                      | Pct.Obs. | Internet Voting | Vote by Mail | Automatic Registration | EDR | Require ID | ED Weekend | ED Holiday |
|----------------------|----------|-----------------|--------------|------------------------|-----|------------|------------|------------|
| **Age**              |          |                 |              |                        |     |            |            |            |
| 18 to 34 years old  | 24       | 38              | 16           | 63                     | 62  | 81         | 43         | 71         |
| 35 to 54 years old  | 39       | 31              | 14           | 48                     | 43  | 76         | 40         | 57         |
| older than 55       | 37       | 24              | 15           | 39                     | 32  | 72         | 43         | 49         |
| **Sex**             |          |                 |              |                        |     |            |            |            |
| male                | 47       | 27              | 14           | 42                     | 37  | 75         | 45         | 56         |
| female              | 53       | 33              | 16           | 53                     | 50  | 76         | 39         | 59         |
| **Race**            |          |                 |              |                        |     |            |            |            |
| White               | 85       | 28              | 14           | 45                     | 41  | 75         | 41         | 55         |
| Black               | 9        | 42              | 16           | 74                     | 62  | 74         | 44         | 78         |
| Hispanic            | 4        | 43              | 16           | 61                     | 60  | 79         | 43         | 65         |
| Asian               | 1        | 42              | 24           | 60                     | 51  | 85         | 61         | 69         |
| **Income**          |          |                 |              |                        |     |            |            |            |
| 39,999 or less      | 34       | 34              | 16           | 56                     | 53  | 76         | 40         | 59         |
| $40,000-69,999       | 30       | 29              | 13           | 47                     | 42  | 76         | 41         | 57         |
| $70,000 or more     | 36       | 29              | 15           | 44                     | 38  | 75         | 45         | 57         |
| **Education**       |          |                 |              |                        |     |            |            |            |
| no h/s or h/s grad | 40       | 31              | 15           | 51                     | 47  | 78         | 38         | 53         |
| some or 2-y college| 31       | 30              | 14           | 47                     | 42  | 77         | 41         | 59         |
| 4-y college or post-grad | 29   | 29              | 16           | 46                     | 42  | 71         | 47         | 62         |
| **Home owner**      |          |                 |              |                        |     |            |            |            |
| no                  | 32       | 37              | 16           | 58                     | 55  | 77         | 43         | 65         |
| yes                 | 68       | 27              | 14           | 44                     | 38  | 75         | 41         | 54         |
| **Disability**      |          |                 |              |                        |     |            |            |            |
| no                  | 84       | 30              | 14           | 48                     | 43  | 76         | 41         | 58         |
| yes                 | 16       | 33              | 18           | 51                     | 46  | 75         | 44         | 56         |
| **Presidential vote** |       |                 |              |                        |     |            |            |            |
| McCain              | 51       | 18              | 7            | 26                     | 22  | 88         | 32         | 40         |
| Obama               | 49       | 39              | 21           | 67                     | 62  | 63         | 50         | 74         |
| **Ideology**        |          |                 |              |                        |     |            |            |            |
| liberal             | 26       | 41              | 22           | 70                     | 67  | 58         | 53         | 77         |
| moderate            | 33       | 32              | 16           | 55                     | 47  | 74         | 43         | 63         |
| conservative        | 41       | 18              | 8            | 27                     | 23  | 88         | 33         | 40         |
| **3-point party ID** |        |                 |              |                        |     |            |            |            |
| Democrat            | 39       | 38              | 20           | 68                     | 62  | 64         | 48         | 73         |
| Independent         | 28       | 31              | 16           | 46                     | 42  | 77         | 47         | 57         |
| Republican          | 34       | 19              | 8            | 27                     | 23  | 88         | 31         | 40         |

Note: Numbers in bold indicate a significant correlation between an individual attribute and support for election reform. For all variables, statistical tests were performed using univariate probit regression, except for race where analysis of variance was used instead.
to vote, and Election Day registration. Income bears no relationship with attitudes about requiring all voters to show photo identification or making Election Day a holiday.

Higher-income respondents were more likely to favor moving Election Day to a weekend. Respondents with higher education were more likely to support moving Election Day to the weekend or to make it a holiday, lower-education respondents were more supportive of Internet absentee voting, automatic voter registration, Election Day registration, and requiring everyone to show photo identification to vote. Homeowners were generally less likely to support all the reforms, except for requiring photo identification and moving Election Day to a weekend, where there was no association between homeownership and reform opinions. Finally, disabled respondents were more supportive of universal vote-by-mail, automatic registration, and Election Day registration; there was no relationship between disability status and support for the other reforms.

Unlike the varied effect of demography, the impact of political affiliations on attitude toward reform is clear and consistent. Obama voters, Democrats, and liberals are more supportive of the reform proposals, with the exception of requiring photo identification. For photo ID, McCain voters, Republicans, and conservatives are more supportive. It is striking, however, that a majority of Obama voters, strong liberals, and Democrats remain supportive of a requirement to show a government-issued piece of photo identification in order to vote.

**MULTIVARIATE RESULTS**

Multivariate analysis can help to clarify the patterns of support discussed in the previous section. First, we find consistently strong relationships between a set of political variables—partisanship, presidential vote choice, and ideology—and support for reform. Because these political variables are themselves highly correlated, multivariate analysis can help parse out the independent influences these three political variables have on reform support. Second, we also know that some of the putative non-political factors that are associated with support for reform are also predictive of the political variables, particularly presidential support. (For instance, women, who are more supportive of Internet voting, automatic registration, and Election Day registration, also voted for Obama at a higher rate than men.) Multivariate analysis can likewise help us parse out the degree to which seemingly non-partisan personal factors influence support for reform, once we control for empirically observed political factors.

When confronted with analyzing a set of binary dependent variables, it is common to employ one of two well-known statistical models, logit or probit analysis. While it is possible to employ those models here, they fail to allow for a critical feature of the data. Different models also allow us to control for different political environments that surround reform proposals. Because election reform politics unfolds at the state level, factors such as party identification or sex that influence support for reform may have different degrees of influence in each state. Therefore, it is important to employ a statistical model that allows the coefficients predicting support for reform to vary across states.

A brute force way to do this would be to run fifty separate analyses for each of the eight reform proposals being analyzed here, and then to essentially average the coefficients across states. A more elegant, efficient, and parsimonious approach is to use a statistical model that allows, by design, the coefficients to vary across each state. A Bayesian hierarchical binary logit model, which is commonly used in marketing research (Rossi, Allenby, and McCulloch 2005), has these features.18

In this class of models, the expression of opinion is theorized as being a function of the utility the respondent associates with each option. Specifically, we specify the utility of supporting reform as \( U_i = X_i' \beta_{a(i)} + \epsilon_i \), where \( X_i \) is a vector of individual characteristics, \( \beta_{a(i)} \) is a vector of coefficients corresponding to the state of residence of individual \( i \), and \( \epsilon_i \) is a logistically distributed disturbance term. Further, we assume the individual is supportive of election reform if \( U_i > 0 \), and otherwise opposes.19 Instead of making the common assumption that coefficients are constant across individuals (that is, instead of setting \( \beta_{a(i)} = \beta \)), our model admits for a more flexible characterization of

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18We estimate the models using a hybrid algorithm developed by Rossi and implemented through R’s bayesm package.

19Suppose \( y_i \) is a binary variable indicating agreement or disagreement with election reform. Since we assume the error term follows a standard logistic distribution, the probability of support equals: \( P(y_i = 1) = \frac{e^{x_i' \beta_{0} \lambda}}{1 + e^{x_i' \beta_{0} \lambda}} \).
voter behavior, by letting parameters change according to respondents’ state of residence, \( s(i) \).\(^{20}\)

In our analysis, we estimate two different models, because we wish to focus on the correlates of election reform attitudes for the population of registered voters and the population of those who voted in a precinct location during the 2008 general election. Examining the former allows us to understand how election reforms are viewed by the broader population of registered voters, including those who did not vote in 2008. The latter model enables us to focus on those registered voters who actually voted in person in 2008, and to include as covariates a variety of measures for the voter’s experience at the polling place in the 2008 election.

Our model for all registered voters includes the following covariates: age, gender, race, income, home ownership, disability, educational attainment, presidential vote, ideology, partisanship, voter confidence, and mode of voting. The model for only precinct voters includes those variables (except mode of voting), and adds whether they voted early, if they reported having a registration problem, if they had difficulty finding their polling place, if the lines were long, if they had a problem with their voting equipment, if they knew the poll workers, if they were asked for voter identification, and if the precinct was well run.

We begin by presenting the results for all registered voters in Table 4. The first row reports baseline probabilities of support for each reform, for the 5th percentile, median, and 95th percentile respondent, respectively. For instance, the median respondent has a 33% probability of supporting Internet voting, an 8% probability of supporting vote-by-mail, etc.\(^{21}\) The remaining rows report how these

\(^{20}\)This random effects procedure is an intermediate approach between a completely pooled national-level analysis, which would not allow capturing the heterogeneity of effects across states, and the inefficient alternative of estimating separate logistic regressions for each state. In the presence of hierarchical data, assuming parameters are constant across states would allow learning about average behavior but might result in inaccurate estimates of state-level effects and poor model fit.

\(^{21}\)Our hypothetical voter is middle-aged, female, white, income ranging between $60,000 and $70,000, is a home owner, has no disabilities, has some college education, voted for McCain, is a non-conservative Republican, is very confident that her vote will be counted, and voted in person on Election Day. Also, when the hypothetical respondent is a precinct voter, she had the following voting experience: had no registration problems, was asked for identification, and thought that the precinct was “very well run.”
baseline probabilities change when we manipulate the various independent variables in “typical” ways, holding all the other dependent variables constant. For instance, moving a respondent who was already at the median of support for Internet voting from the 44–53 age category to the 54–62 age category reduces the probability of support for this reform by two percentage points.

Examining Table 4 as a whole, two patterns stand out. First, the personal demographic characteristics are generally minor in magnitude. None of the personal demographic effects has an influence that reaches into the double digits. Overall, demographic factors have minimal effects in predicting support for election reform, once the political characteristics have been controlled for. There are some exceptions to this generalization that are relevant to election policy. For instance, ceteris paribus, non-whites are moderately more supportive of automatic registration, Election Day registration, and requiring the use of identification, compared to whites.

Second, voting for Barack Obama has a strong independent influence on support for most election reforms. The exceptions are support for showing photo identification, which Obama voters oppose, and support for vote-by-mail, which Obama supporters favor at only slightly higher rates than McCain voters.

Note that this analysis controls for ideology and party identification. In the multivariate analysis, these factors retain some influence, but at only a fraction of the level shown by support for Obama. For instance, moving a hypothetical median respondent from being an Obama supporter to a McCain supporter reduces the probability of support for Internet voting by 17 percentage points, ceteris paribus; moving the same median respondent from being a moderate to being a conservative only reduces support by 5 percentage points. Similar manipulations of the partisanship variables reveal even smaller effects.

While the distinction between support for Obama, party identification, and ideology revealed in the multivariate analysis may seem like a distinction without a difference, it may in fact be quite consequential for how election reform politics proceed over the next several years. In general, political support for presidents is more volatile at the individual level than party identification and ideology. Therefore, to the degree that state legislators are likely to take cues from their constituents about the political palatability of election reform, they are likely to respond to Obama’s fading fortunes (compared to 2008) more so than any short-term softening of support for the Democratic Party more generally.

One final result from Table 4 bears mentioning. Respondents who voted by mail were significantly more likely to support reforms that would require all voters to use the mail, and much more supportive of Internet voting. The former is not so surprising, but the latter is significant, since it suggests that voters who no longer use traditional precincts have generalized their experience by becoming more accepting of non-traditional ways of voting.

Table 5 presents results for only in-precinct voters. Doing so gives us the opportunity to assess the impact of experiences unique to precinct voters on support for election reform. Table 5 gives another first-difference analysis, conducted identically to that presented earlier. These results show again the strength of the partisan and ideological polarization of opinions regarding election reform. Here we focus on three results specific to precinct voters: how being asked for identification and having a problem with one’s voter registration or voting equipment might affect opinions about election reform.

First, voters who report having been asked to show photo identification are considerably more likely to support more restrictive identification laws. Second, if voters report having a registration problem, ceteris paribus, they are 20 points more likely to support automatic registration and 17 points more likely to support Election Day registration. This shows how having a problem in the polling place can strongly be associated with opinions about election reforms that might resolve the problems experienced by that voter. Third, voters who said they had an equipment problem were 21 points more likely to support automatic registration, and 10 points more likely to support making Election Day a holiday. Having a problem with voting seems to be strongly associated with supporting election reforms that might mitigate the problem the voter experienced.

CONCLUSIONS

Our analysis of the American voting public’s support for many potential election reforms provides important insights into the direction of innovations in the electoral process in the near future. First, we found that some reforms have mixed support. These
Table 5. Effect of Independent Variables on Support for Reform among Precinct Voters, Based on Multivariate Analysis (First Differences [90% Posterior Intervals])

| Change from median voter characteristics | Internet Voting | Vote-By-Mail | Automatic Registration | Election Day Registration | Require ID | Election Day to Weekend | Make Election Day a Holiday |
|------------------------------------------|----------------|--------------|------------------------|--------------------------|------------|------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Probability of support                   | 24             | 34           | 46                     | 3                        | 6          | 11                     | 42                          |
| 44-53 to 54-62 years old                 | -6             | -2           | 2                      | -1                       | 0          | 2                      | -10                         |
| Gender: female to male                   | -7             | -1           | 4                      | -2                       | 0          | 3                      | -9                          |
| Race: white to non-white                 | -10            | -3           | 5                      | -5                       | -3         | -1                     | 1                           |
| Income: $60.0-69.9k to $70.0-79.9k       | -3             | 0            | 4                      | -1                       | 0          | 1                      | -4                          |
| Home owner: yes to no                    | -4             | 2            | 8                      | -3                       | -1         | 1                      | -10                         |
| Disabled: no to yes                      | -7             | 0            | 8                      | -3                       | -1         | 1                      | 11                          |
| Education: some college to 2-y degree    | -4             | 0            | 4                      | -1                       | 0          | 1                      | -7                          |
| Presidential vote: Obama to McCain      | -27            | -13          | 9                      | -5                       | -2         | 37                     | -30                         |
| Moderate to conservative                 | -10            | -6           | -2                     | -3                       | -1         | 0                      | -15                         |
| Independent to Republican                | -1             | 4            | 10                     | -2                       | 0          | 2                      | -8                          |
| Independent to Democrat                  | -9             | -4           | 1                      | -1                       | 0          | 3                      | -3                          |
| Voter confidence: very to somewhat       | -11            | -5           | -1                     | -2                       | 0          | 2                      | -3                          |
| Vote: in person E.D. to early            | -4             | 3            | 11                     | 4                        | 9          | 1                      | -6                          |
| Registration problem: no to yes          | -11            | 3            | 18                     | -6                       | -2         | 4                      | 7                           |
| Finding poll. place: very to fairly easy | 1              | 9            | 17                     | 0                        | 2          | 7                      | -2                          |
| Line: less than 10min to 10-30min        | -3             | 1            | 5                      | -2                       | 0          | 1                      | -6                          |
| Equipment problem: no to yes             | -18            | -6           | 7                      | -3                       | 1          | 9                      | 10                          |
| Know poll worker: no to yes              | -7             | -1           | 6                      | -4                       | -1         | 1                      | -2                          |
| Asked for ID: no to yes                   | -4             | 2            | 9                      | -2                       | 1          | 4                      | -2                          |
| Precinct well run: okay to very well     | -9             | -2           | 4                      | -2                       | 0          | 2                      | -3                          |
include attitudes toward automatic voter registration, Election Day voter registration, and moving Election Day to a weekend. These reforms do not have majority support among all voters in the United States, but there are pockets of majority support within many states. Second, we found that Internet voting and voting by mail did not receive a great deal of support from American voters. There was no state where Internet voting was supported by a majority of voters and there were no states that do not already have universal vote-by-mail where expanded vote-by-mail had majority support. Finally, we found that a majority of Americans support two reforms—requiring showing photo identification (overwhelming support) and making Election Day a holiday (bare majority support). These two reforms have strong support nationally and a majority of support in most of the states. Americans, in general, are more interested in the one reform that would promote security, requiring photo identification, than any of the convenience voting reforms that would improve the accessibility to the voting process.

Our findings are indicative of where the public stands today, with what they know about these election reforms currently. These results do not mean that election reforms with substantial support from voters are inevitable, that reforms without substantial support will never be enacted, or that voters actually have strong or well-formed opinions about the potential ramifications of reform. Still, the patterns we discover here have implications for current politics and for the likelihood of election reform in future years.

Partisanship, for instance, is strongly associated with support for and opposition to virtually every reform proposal. To a large degree, these popular reform attitudes seem consistent with what we know of legislative preferences, both at the national and state levels, though the partisan divisions are likely stronger among legislators than among their electoral supporters. Although there are exceptions, Democratic lawmakers tend to advocate most of the reforms we explore in this article, and that support tends to be mirrored, in a muted fashion, among the electorate. (The exceptions are requiring photo identification and Internet voting.) However, as our multivariate analysis indicates, these partisan support patterns may arise most strongly out of affiliations with candidates, who happen to bear party labels, rather than out of partisanship, per se. The test of this observation will come in the future, as support for Barack Obama waxes and wanes, and as shifting political fortunes may rearrange the association of specific reform proposals with the two parties.

Younger voters tend to support the reforms studied here, except all-mail voting and moving Election Day to a weekend. What we cannot judge is whether this is a cross-sectional or a cohort effect. That is, we cannot tell whether younger voters are more likely to support reforms because young people are inherently prone to support making it easier to vote, or because they have lived more of their lives surrounded by easy conveniences and electronic appliances. If the latter, and if reforms tend to be more likely when voters support them, then it may be a matter of time before support for some of these reforms, such as voter identification and making Election Day a holiday, become irresistible. If the former, then there are no obvious future trends favoring or opposing reform.

Finally, the findings here provide an interesting insight into how the adoption of weakly supported (or even strongly opposed) reforms may eventually win over voters. Note that respondents were overwhelmingly opposed to vote-by-mail, except in Oregon and Washington—one state that has long had the practice, and the other which has recently transitioned to it. Unfortunately, we do not have evidence of attitudes toward vote-by-mail in these two states prior to its adoption, but it is hard to believe that residents in Oregon and Washington were wildly out of step with voters in other states, even though they may have supported it more than average. For all Oregon and most Washington voters, voting by mail is “the way it’s done,” and voters there by-and-large support it like voters in no other state.

As states confront fiscal challenges, our hypothesis that shifts in election policy may actually drive support for different reforms will be subject to the test. For instance, Montana is currently considering shifting to vote-by-mail elections for all federal, state, and local elections by 2012.22 Assuming the bill, which enjoys strong support in the legislature, passes, we will be in a position to see whether Montana residents, only 23% of whom sup-

22Daniel Person, “Top Montana Official Wants All-Mail Elections,” Bozeman Daily Chronicle, October 5, 2010, <http://www.bozemandailychronicle.com/news/article_148892e2-d00f-11df-8ab5-001cc4e002e0.html>, last accessed January 19, 2011; Charles S. Johnson, “Vote-by-mail bill has bipartisan support,” Helena Independent Record, January 5, 2011, <http://helenair.com/news/state-and-regional/article_28a10388-1919-11e0-a99f-001cc4c002e0.html>, last accessed January 19, 2011.
ported requiring vote-by-mail in 2008, change their minds.

In general, now that we have benchmarked all states according to their voters’ attitudes toward electoral reform, it will be possible in the future to answer causal questions concerning public attitudes toward electoral practices. Are states whose citizens most support particular electoral reforms more likely to enact them? Do voters in states that adopt reform become more accepting of those reforms after they have been adopted and put into place?

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