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Local and Absentee Voter Registration Drives on a College Campus

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Abstract: More than 1.7 million students attend out-of-state colleges, and most are eligible to vote in either their home state or in their college state. Despite the potential impact of the "away" student vote on close elections, on-campus voter drives that promote absentee voting are rare.

Here we report a detailed outcome study of an in-person campus voter drive conducted at Northwestern University in Fall 2008, in which students were offered a choice of college state (Illinois) or home state (absentee) registration and voting. Voting in swing states was actively encouraged for those who had that choice. Students from swing states selected absentee voting over Illinois voting by an 8:1 ratio. Students from other non-swing states showed a 2:1 ratio. Notably, both groups preferred absentee voting despite its greater complexity.

We found that for students who successfully registered in Illinois, or who received an absentee ballot from another state, turnout was very high: over 80% of each group cast a ballot. Concerns about low absentee turnout due to the complexity of absentee voting were not justified.

We report the rate of failures in absentee voting, and the causes of those failures. We also investigated whether any student abused the privilege of absentee voting by voting twice; we found that none had.

1. Summary of findings

This paper reports results that are most immediately relevant to individuals or groups considering a voter drive on a college campus that has a significant number of out-of-state students. By "voter drive" we mean a campaign of person-to-person contact between drive volunteers and potential voters, not online campaigns or do-it-yourself registrations. Political organizers know that many potential voters, and young adults in particular, are more likely to respond to a person-to-person campaign¹. The Northwestern drive consisted entirely of a person-to-person campaign.

- **Absentee voter drives are now feasible.** An absentee (home state) voter drive on a college campus is logistically feasible, although more complex than an local voting drive. A number of successful absentee drives took place in 2008. These were greatly facilitated by newly available online resources for forms and information. Logistic considerations are outlined in this paper (section 4.1), including most importantly that drive organizers collected, addressed, stamped, and mailed the application forms, and that they provided a way of making copies of photo identification on the spot.

- **Students prefer to vote absentee in their home state.** The drive at Northwestern University, analyzed here, offered each student a choice of registering for local voting in Illinois (the college state) or for absentee voting in their home state. Absentee voting was encouraged for students from swing states. Students from non-swing states were mildly encouraged to vote in Illinois. Students from swing states showed a dramatic preference for absentee voting in their home state, over local voting in Illinois, by an 8:1 ratio. Even students from other non-swing states preferred absentee voting in their home state over local voting in Illinois by a 2:1 ratio.

- **Students are reliable voters; turnout is very high.** Our study tracked more than 500 students who applied to vote in Illinois and more than 600 who applied to vote absentee

¹ Student PIRGs' New Voter Project toolkit, Fall 2008, p.5

in their home states. Of those enabled to vote (more on that issue below), over 80% of each group did vote.

- **The failure rate for absentee voting is significant.** 16% of applicants for absentee voting were not enabled to vote. In 1/3 of these cases, an error was made by the applicant, and in 2/3 of the cases the error was made by county boards of elections. Most errors by applicants could be prevented by adding minor annotations to the application forms.

- **Vote yield is high.** Despite the losses in absentee voting, the Northwestern University voter drive resulted in 71 successful absentee votes for every 100 students served. For students choosing Illinois voting, the corresponding figure was 79 successful votes for every 100 students served. The Illinois figure is specific to our local jurisdiction, which is efficient and friendly to student voting. A voter drive in a jurisdiction that is hostile or inefficient might result in a lower vote yield for local voting.

- **The number of potential student absentee voters is large.** There are more than 1.7 million out-of-state college students who are eligible to choose where to vote. During the 2008 election, there were 330,000 students from 15 swing states attending college in non-swing states². Furthermore, out-of-state students tend to be concentrated. For instance, half of all out-of-state students may be found at colleges at which 45-100% of their classmates are also from out-of-state³.

- **Students don't abuse the privilege of absentee voting.** There is an important distinction between voters who wind up registered in more than one location, often unintentionally, as opposed to vote fraud in which more than one ballot is cast. We investigated all 641 students who applied for absentee ballots and found that a number were double registered. None of these students voted twice.

2. Absentee voter drives on campus

College students are legally eligible to vote, at their option, either in their home state or in their college state⁴. In practice both local and absentee student voting can still be highly contentious⁵. During the 2008 election, more than 330,000 students from 15 swing states were attending college in non-swing states⁶. Many of these would have preferred to vote in their home state.

Out-of-state students tend to be concentrated at certain colleges. In fact, half of all out-of-state students attend colleges at which 45-100% of their classmates are also from out-of-state⁷. Concentrations of out-of-state students eligible to vote absentee in close elections ought to make "high density" schools attractive registration targets for civic or political organizations, but there have been few such drives.

² Calculated from data provided by the National Center for Education Statistics.

³ Calculated from data provided by the National Center for Education Statistics.

⁴ Richard G. Niemi, Michael J. Hanmer, and Thomas H. Jackson. "Where Can and Should College Students Vote? A Legal, Empirical, and Normative Perspective." Paper presented at the annual State Politics and Policy conference, Philadelphia, PA, May 30-31, 2008

⁵ Andy Guess, "Barriers to Student Voting", Inside Higher Ed, Sept. 26, 2008.

⁶ From votebackhome.com. Calculated from data provided by the National Center for Education Statistics.

⁷ Calculated from data provided by the National Center for Education Statistics.

The lack of absentee drives might, in part, be due to the poor reputation young people have for voting. For college students, however, this reputation is undeserved. A follow-up study to the 2004 election⁸ found that 77% of all college students reported having voted, nearly twice the participation rate of 18 to 24 year olds who were not in college.

Absentee voter drives are surely more complex to organize than local voter registration drives, and this may be a disincentive. Additionally, there is a belief that young people are fickle voters, and that adding steps to the process, and the necessary forethought that absentee voting requires, will lead to poor results. Our study shows that this belief is incorrect.



Figure 1. The Northwestern voter drive was conducted by "tabling" at popular campus locations and events, under a banner that encouraged absentee voting, particularly for students from swing states.

Whether for reasons of greater complexity, or for lack of faith in young voters, absentee voter drives have been rare. A disincentive to undertaking an absentee voter drive is the burden of providing state-by-state registration and absentee ballot request materials. There is no standardization of procedures, rules, or application forms from state to state. Until recently the logistical difficulty of complying with this great diversity would have

⁸ College students in the 2004 Election, Richard Niemi and Michael Hanmer, Working Paper, Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement, Nov. 2004

been prohibitive. Nevertheless in 2004, students at Stanford University attempted compilation and distribution of a book of forms for all states⁹. By the 2008 election, most state and county materials were available online. Several websites compiled materials and guidance across all states, making drives like the one at Northwestern achievable in a way they have not been in the past. Notably, LongDistanceVoter.org compiled state-by-state materials for registration and absentee ballot requests, with instructions and mailing addresses. VoteBackHome.com¹⁰ made enrollment statistics and logistic resources available specifically for person-to-person college voter drives.

To the best of our knowledge, no study prior to this one has been done on the efficacy of a multi-state absentee voter drive on a college campus, or indeed in any venue. (Other venues where one could find high densities of people eligible to vote absentee in other states are military bases and senior "snowbird" communities.) We are not aware of any significant college absentee voter drives prior to 2008, but in 2008 there were several organized efforts. Drives that resulted in at least several hundred absentee ballot applications took place at New York University¹¹, University of Chicago¹², Stanford University¹³, and Syracuse University¹⁴, as well as ours at Northwestern University. Only the Northwestern drive retained records of the submitted applications, which has made it possible to do this follow-up study.

Each of the college absentee voter drives used different methods. What they had in common was an emphasis on peer-to-peer recruitment of potential voters, by methods known colloquially as "tabling" and "dormstorming". Stanford and NYU employed dormstorming, either room to room (Stanford) or in the lobby of each dorm (NYU). Many colleges attempt to prohibit political activity in dorms, and NYU's drive commenced only after a struggle with the administration. Because of the steady pace of applicants in dormstorming, these drives were able to use print-as-you-go formsets.

At University of Chicago, Syracuse University, and our drive at Northwestern University, volunteers staffed tables in high-traffic locations. Tabling is prone to surges of applicants (Figure 1), and these drives used photocopied formsets to allow many students to complete applications at the same time.

3. Northwestern University political atmosphere and demographics

A limitation of our study is that it involves a single school. Other schools might have a less or more politically engaged student body, or a different distribution of socioeconomic, geographic, or political backgrounds, or might be a public rather than a private university. Any of these factors could affect voting behavior.

Northwestern University is a private university located just outside of Chicago, Illinois. It has an undergraduate population of 8,100 students, and a graduate student population of 7,500. The school was ranked 12th nationally by US News and World Report in 2009

⁹ The book was used at Stanford and perhaps at some other schools, but the success of these efforts was not monitored. (Ben Elberger and Adam Schwartz, personal communication, August 2009)

¹⁰ VoteBackHome.com was created by one of the authors (Peshkin)

¹¹ Neal S. Shechter, personal communication, Sept. 2008

¹² Rebecca Maurer, personal communication, Sept. 2008

¹³ Sarahi Constantine, personal communication, Oct. 2008

¹⁴ W. Michael Short, personal communication, Oct., 2008

and is considered academically rigorous. Tuition is typical of highly ranked private universities.

Northwestern has a longstanding reputation for being politically quiet, although surveys show a level of political and civic engagement¹⁵ that is average for private colleges. Three-quarters of Northwestern undergraduates are from states other than Illinois. One-quarter¹⁶ of the students at Northwestern are from what turned out to be swing states in the 2008 election.

Northwestern is located in Cook County Illinois, a county that includes the City of Chicago as well as a number of its suburbs. Most of Cook County is strongly Democratic. Chicago has a reputation for voting irregularities and vote fraud, but this is based on political corruption that is decades in the past. Voter registration is administered by the Cook County Clerk's office, with the help of trained volunteer deputy registrars. Today, registration is efficient and reliable. Lines at campus polling places on election day were minimal or nonexistent.

Our study therefore compares absentee voting all across the US with local voting in one unproblematic county. A school located in a hostile or less efficient county might have poorer results for local voting.

4. Methods and analysis

This study did not originate as a purposeful experiment; it is rather an analysis of naturally occurring political activity. (The authors were involved in that political activity¹⁷.) In this section we describe both the methods of the voter drive, and the methods of the subsequent follow-up data collection and analysis.

4.1 Absentee and local voter drive methods

During the 2008 campaign students were bombarded by email and other exhortations to register and vote. While this strategy was effective for some students, many do not respond to online or advertising approaches no matter the number to which they are exposed. A direct person-to-person appeal will often succeed for these students. This observation is nothing new. Political lore as well as research observes that the best way to recruit voters is to approach them one-to-one, in person¹⁸.

A student group coalesced in September 2008 for the purpose of voter registration, naming itself "NU Decides." The group set up and staffed three registration points on campus: the student center, the largest academic building, and "The Rock" (a central outdoor quad). Tables were staffed on approximately eight days, including two days of freshman orientation events, and the days immediately preceding the common registration deadline in many states (the first week in October). Tables were staffed by between one and four volunteers. Applicants tended to arrive in surges between class periods.

¹⁵ Northwestern University 2008 TFS institutional summary

¹⁶ votebackhome.com

¹⁷ Castle and Levy as student leaders, Peshkin as a faculty advisor.

¹⁸ Donald P. Green, Alan S. Gerber. "Get Out the Vote: How to Increase Voter Turnout" Brookings Inst. Press, 2004

Tables had registration and absentee forms for almost all states (a few states, including nearby Michigan, have special inhibiting restrictions). Forms were stocked in quantity¹⁹ so that surges of applicants could be handled efficiently. Many states require a copy of a driver's license or other identification or evidence of residency. These were copied at the registration tables using an inkjet printer/scanner combo. Applicants were given a paper with information about NU Decides, the voter registration process, and where and how to vote. Drive volunteers made information available to students about each state's deadlines, requirements, or restrictions. Many of the Illinois applicants were registered by drive volunteers who had been trained and qualified by the Cook County Clerk's office as deputy registrars²⁰.

Importantly, drive volunteers retained the completed forms and the copies of identification, checked them over immediately for errors, and within 24 hours²¹ had looked up the mailing address for each, and had addressed, stamped and mailed the forms. Drive organizers felt that entrusting the completed forms to the applicants would result in many of them not being mailed, especially since postage stamps are an increasingly rare commodity in dorm rooms.

A large banner (Figure 1) at registration tables promoted registration and voting, especially in swing states²². Students from swing states were actively encouraged by drive volunteers at the tables to register in their home state and to vote absentee because their votes would have more impact. Students from non-swing states were encouraged to register for local voting in order to show by their concentration that young people do care about politics.

The forms used were the state-specific registration form and absentee-ballot request form suggested by each state, or in a few cases by each county. The 50-state common "Help America Vote Act" (HAVA) registration form was not used. Calls to numerous county clerks ascertained that the HAVA form was unfamiliar at the county level, because it is intended to be mailed to a state office. Absentee ballot requests are processed by the counties, and county clerks strongly advised against sending registration forms to one place and absentee ballot requests to another, close to the deadlines.

The drive was advertised using campus-wide email lists through dorms, academic departments, and student organizations. Additionally, volunteers flyered the sidewalks and painted banners.

¹⁹ Forms were printed in proportion to the number of enrolled students from each state, as reported at votebackhome.com

²⁰ Being a deputy allows some simplification in confirming local residency.

²¹ Some states have laws about the handling or retention of registration forms, and some registration drives are wary of processing or mailing the forms for fear of running afoul of these laws.

²² The swing states advertised were Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, North Carolina, New Mexico, Nevada, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Wisconsin.

4.2 Data collection

Drive organizers made copies of all completed forms before mailing them to county clerks. The copies were databased and later used as the basis for this study. 641 students requested an absentee (home state) ballot. The great majority of these students also registered or re-registered through our drive. 503 students registered for Illinois voting.

In Spring 2009 we contacted the appropriate county or state office by telephone for each of the 641 absentee applicants. We were able to obtain results for 635 of these²³, some requiring considerable perseverance. For Illinois applicants we enjoyed excellent cooperation from the Cook County Clerk's office, and we obtained results for all 503 applicants.

For each absentee applicant, we determined if an absentee ballot had been sent out, and whether the voted ballot was returned. If no ballot was sent out we probed further: was a registration form received? Was it invalid for some reason? If a ballot was sent out but election records showed that no vote was cast by that registered voter, we contacted the student and asked for his or her story. A number of these investigations found errors or irregularities, which we have catalogued (Section 6.)

For Illinois applicants, we determined if they were duly entered onto the appropriate registration roll, and whether they voted. We investigated until all cases were fully resolved.

5. Results

An argument against absentee voter drives is that the additional complexity and forethought involved in registering, obtaining a ballot, and mailing it back in time to be counted will result in low voting rates. Weighing against this is the enhanced incentive of being able to cast a ballot in a swing state or a close election. We were able to assess and compare the vote yield (the overall vote-production effectiveness) of an absentee (home state) voter drive as compared to a local (college state) voter drive.

5.1 Vote yield: ballot-access and turnout

Two factors contribute to vote yield: ballot-access and turnout. These factors are intended to capture, respectively, an applicant being enabled to vote, and choosing to vote.

Ballot-access measures how well the system works. Not everyone who plans to vote in an upcoming election is enabled to do so. Board of elections policies or actions both accidental and malicious, voter errors, drive volunteer errors, postal delays, and many other incidents can make a voter unwelcome at the polls, or prevent the sending out, receiving back, and counting of an absentee ballot. For local voting ballot-access means a successful registration, such that a student served by the voter drive is put on the registration rolls and is welcome to vote at the polls on election day. For absentee voting ballot-access means that the whole process works: the correct forms are filled out, mailed to the right address, received and honored by the appropriate county board of

²³ We were not able to obtain results for voters in Virginia, which has a state law in effective defiance of the Freedom of Information Act.

elections, that an absentee ballot is sent out and received by the voter in time to return it, and (if voted) that it is received and tallied by the county. The ballot-access factor is meant to capture everything that can go wrong, regardless of fault, except for an individual's decision not to vote.

Turnout measures voter behavior. Not everyone with ballot-access actually votes. For local voting turnout is the fraction of registered voters²⁴ who vote. For absentee voting turnout is the fraction of those in possession of a ballot who vote and send it back.

Vote yield is then the product of ballot-access and turnout. For 100 students who approached the voter drive table and expressed a desire to vote in Illinois, or 100 students who approached the voter drive table and expressed a desire to vote absentee in their home state, how many ballots were ultimately cast and counted?

Table 2 summarizes the results. There were a statistically useful number of applicants in both the Illinois pool and in the absentee (home state) pool. As might be expected by skeptics of absentee voter drives, there were many more failures and errors among the absentee pool: 16%, as compared to 3% for Illinois applicants. The ballot-access percentage reflects the losses due to failures and errors. The ballot-access figure for absentee applicants (84%) is the more general result because it is an average across many counties and states. The Illinois ballot-access percentage (97%) is for Cook County, Illinois, and could be quite different elsewhere.

The number and percentage of voluntary non-voters was slightly higher for Illinois registrants than for absentee (home state) registrants. One might expect that Illinois registrants would be less motivated since the Presidential election in Illinois was not close, but conversely that absentee registrants might be more prone to neglect to send in their ballot. The turnout percentage (fraction of registrants with ballot-access who voted) was 81% for the Illinois pool, and 84% for the absentee (home state) pool. This difference in rates is not statistically significant for our sample size. The possibility of there being a strong difference in turnout rates, however, is excluded.

The overall vote yield (number or rate of votes cast) was higher for the Illinois pool than for the absentee (home state) pool: 79% vs. 71%. Planners of a voter drive, when considering whether to promote absentee (home state) voting and/or local voting, would want to weigh the difference in vote yield against the difference in impact on election outcomes, or on whatever their goals are. Again it should be noted that while the vote yield for the absentee pool is an average over many home states, the vote yield for the Illinois pool is specific to our friendly local jurisdiction.

²⁴ In general one would wish to exclude registered voters who have moved away or died, but have not been removed from the rolls. In our study, all registered voters were current students residing locally.

Table 2.	Illinois (college state) applicants	Absentee (home state) applicants
Number of applicants served	503	641
Number of failures and errors (any cause)	14	101
Number of applicants who were enabled to vote	489	540
"Ballot access" (fraction of applicants who were enabled to vote)	97%	84%
Number of voluntary non-voters	92	81
Number of successful voters	396	452
"Turnout" (fraction of those enabled to vote, who did so)	81%	84%
"Vote yield" (fraction of all applicants who successfully voted)	79%	71%

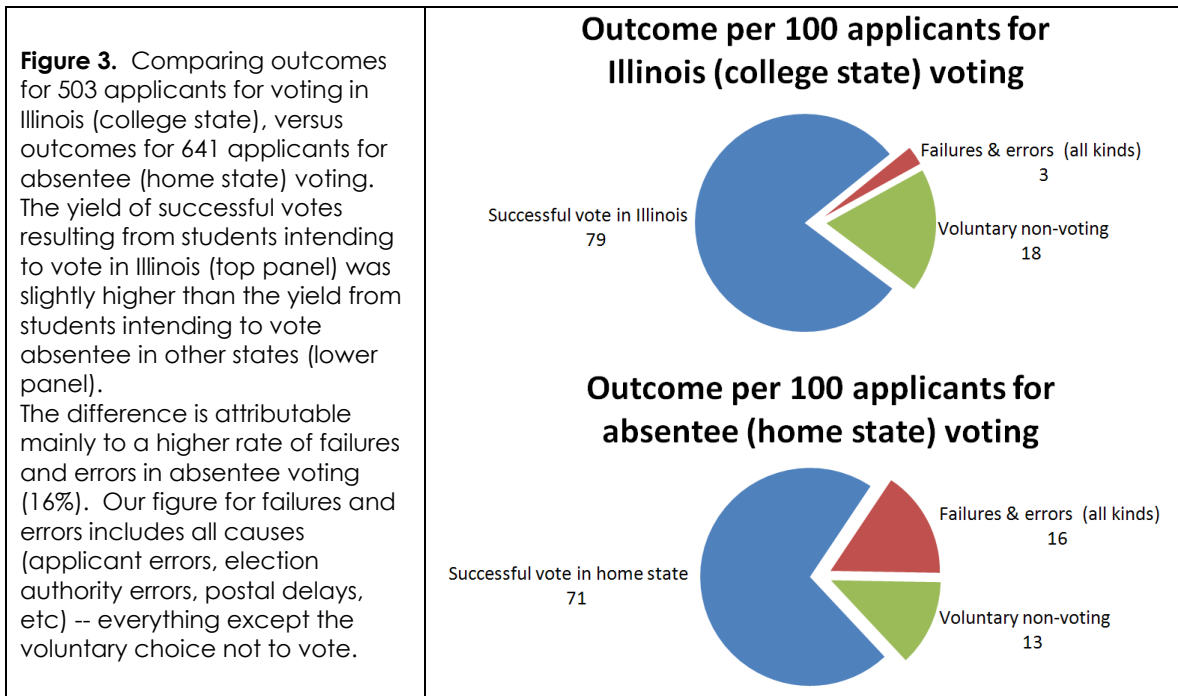


Figure 3 summarizes the outcomes graphically, per 100 applicants in the Illinois pool or the absentee (home state) pool. In the Illinois pool, of each 100 applicants assisted by the voter drive, 3 were not enabled to vote, 18 chose not to vote, and 79 voted (thus, the vote yield was 79%). In the absentee (home state) pool, of each 100 applicants, 16 errors or failures occurred, and of the remaining 84 students who were enabled to vote, 13 chose not to vote, and 71 voted (thus, the vote yield was 71%). The turnout percentage is not immediately readable from the pie charts²⁵ but is given in Table 2.

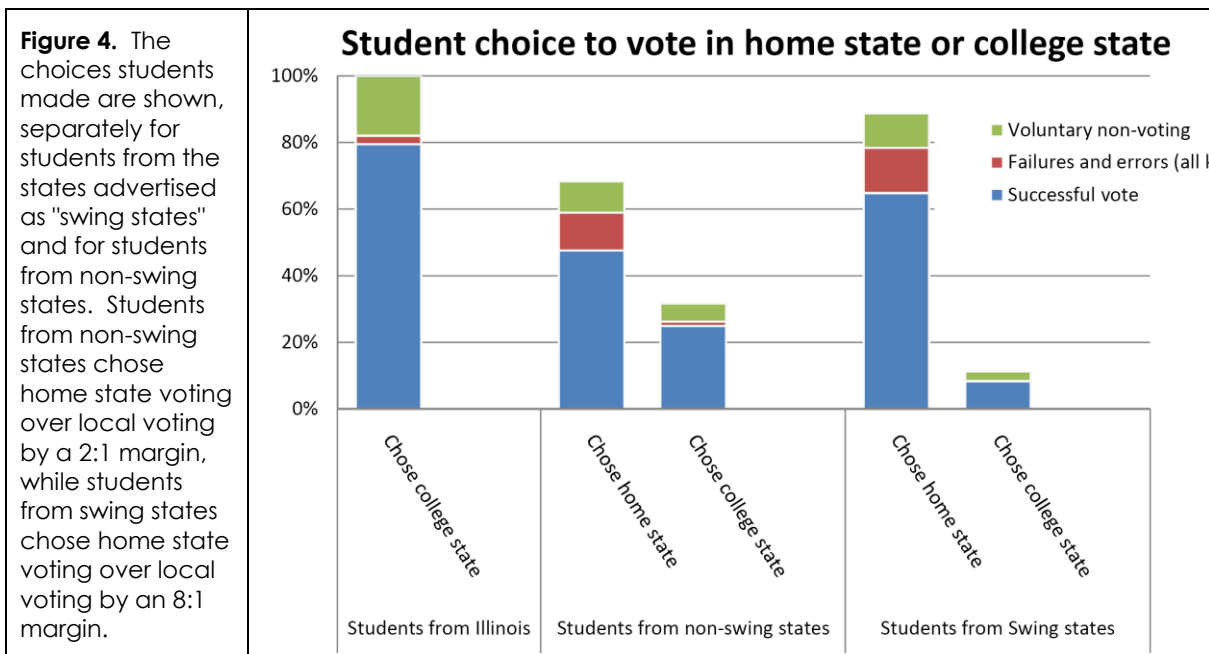
²⁵ For instance, Table 2's 84% turn-out figure for absentee applicants, is found in Figure 3 as 71 successful voters out of (71+13) applicants who were enabled to vote.

5.2 Students from swing states more strongly prefer home state voting

We grouped all of our applicants, those who chose Illinois voting as well as those who chose absentee (home state) voting, by their state of origin²⁶. Students from Illinois could of course only vote in Illinois. For the others, we grouped the students into those from swing states and those from non-swing states. We could then see if these groups made different choices about whether to vote in Illinois or in their home state.

Figure 4 shows the results. 313 applicants were from Illinois, and these registered in Illinois (first bar in Figure 4). 477 applicants were from non-swing states other than Illinois, and these chose absentee (home state) voting over Illinois voting by a 2:1 ratio (middle bars in Figure 4). Other studies²⁷ also find that students prefer voting in their home town over their college town, by about this ratio.

A dramatically different result was seen, however, for the 354 students from swing states (last bars in Figure 4). Whether on prior knowledge or in response to drive volunteers' encouragement to do so, these students chose absentee voting in their home states over Illinois voting by an 8:1 ratio. Clearly, students were eager to optimize the impact of their vote on the Presidential election.



5.3 Some students were prevented from voting in their home state

For our students in Illinois, the nearby state of Michigan presented a particular problem. Three percent of Northwestern undergraduate students are from Michigan: more than

²⁶ For the state of origin of students who chose to register in Illinois, we used University records. For the state of origin of absentee applicants, we used the state to which they applied for an absentee ballot.

²⁷ College students in the 2004 Election, Richard Niemi and Michael Hanmer, Working Paper, Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement, Nov. 2004

200 students. Michigan requires first-time voters to either register in person, or to vote in person. Louisiana imposes similar restrictions. Hawaii requires a lengthy and impractical process²⁸. All other states will accept a photocopy of a state driver's license²⁹ sent by mail together with registration and absentee ballot requests. For many Northwestern undergraduates 2008 was the first general election for which they were of voting age, and they found themselves without a practical way to vote in their home state of Michigan.

5.4 Double registration? Double voting?

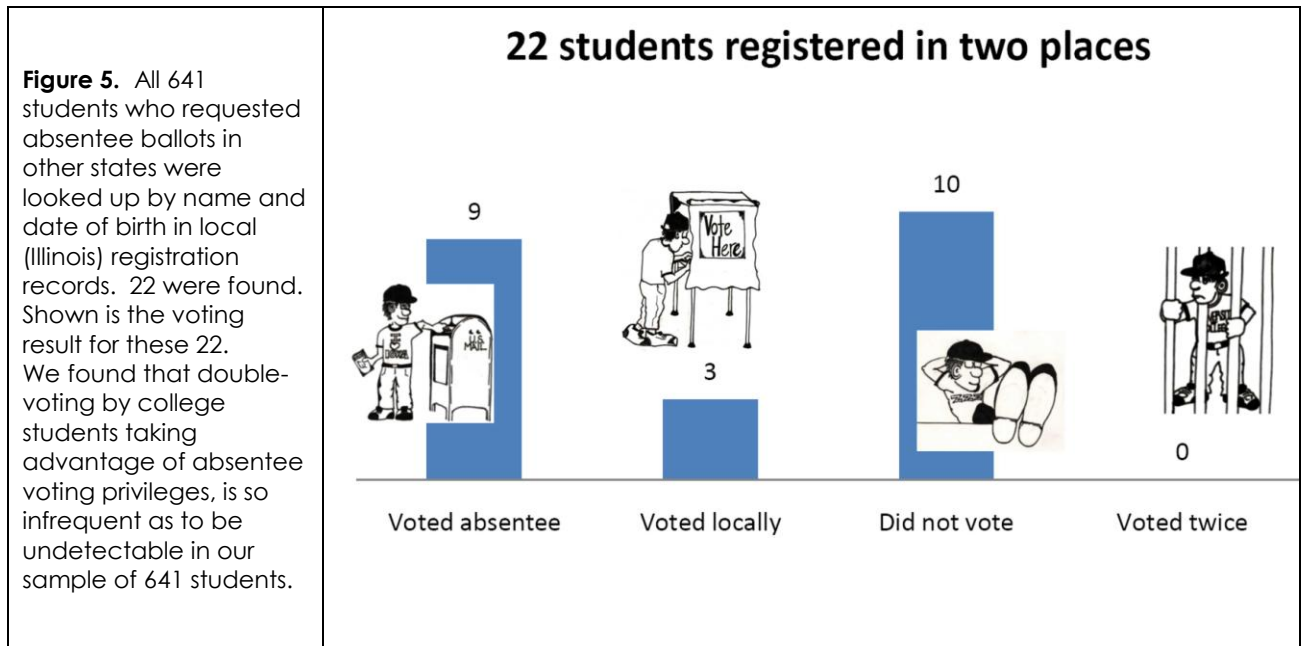
State laws such as those in Michigan, Louisiana, or Hawaii that make absentee voting difficult, are often claimed to be necessary in order to prevent vote fraud. There is an extensive policy literature (which we will not go into here) discussing the appropriate balance between preventing vote fraud vs. inhibiting rightful voters from voting. The heated 2008 campaign season included allegations of fraud committed or facilitated by voter registration organizations³⁰. The distinction between a fraudulent vote and a duplicate or frivolous registration was largely lost. In 2004, there were allegations of double voting via absentee ballot, specifically by Florida "snowbirds"—senior citizens who also have residences in New York³¹. We wished to investigate new voters, with due attention to the distinction between double registration and double voting.

²⁸ Hawaii requires voters to register to vote, and then the state sends a Notice of Voter Registration and Address Confirmation to the would-be voter's Hawaii address. That Notice must be somehow retrieved by the voter, and returned to the state with a request to vote absentee.

²⁹ Requirements for identification or evidence of residency vary by state. Many allow other forms of evidence as well.

³⁰ Oskar Garcia (AP), "Official: Registration issues won't affect vote", San Francisco Chronicle, Oct. 8, 2008

³¹ Russ Buettner, "Exposed: Scandal of Double Voters: 46,000 registered to vote in city & Fla." NY Daily News, Aug. 22, 2004



With the cooperation of the Cook County Clerk's office, we looked up each of our 641 absentee applicants to see if they were also on the Illinois voter registration rolls. Twenty-two students were found to be double-registered. These did not necessarily intend to be double-registered. Even if a voter dutifully informs the county clerk that he or she has moved or has registered elsewhere, that voter's name often remains on the registration rolls for some time. Additionally, such dutifulness is far from usual. As Figure 5 illustrates, of the twenty-two double-registered, we found that nine voted absentee but not locally, three voted locally but not absentee, and ten did not vote. None voted twice. To state our result precisely: We found that double-voting by college students taking advantage of absentee voting privileges was so infrequent as to be undetectable in our sample of 641 students.

6. Analysis of failures and errors in absentee voting

That one out of six of our absentee ballot applicants were not enabled to vote (101 people) demands further explanation. To the extent possible we determined in each case whether the error or failure could be attributed to the applicant or to the election apparatus. In some cases error cannot be differentiated between an applicant and the volunteers or organizers of a drive. For example, an applicant may fill out a form for the wrong state, provided by a drive volunteer, or may put his local address in the place where a form requests residence address. Drive volunteers may fail to catch the mistake. Likewise, we cannot unequivocally differentiate between an error of a county board of elections and the US postal service. If a voter receives his ballot three days after the election, it was clearly mailed too late, given the speed and reliability of the postal service. If it never arrives, we cannot determine who lost it.

Of the 101 unsuccessful absentee applicants, we found 39 errors attributable to the applicant or to drive volunteers (6% of all applications). We found 62 errors or failures attributable to county boards of elections or to the postal service (10% of all applications).

Most of the errors by applicants or drive volunteers were one of these: (1) Not sending both a registration form and an absentee ballot request, often because a student was sure (and wrong) about being registered already. (2) Listing an incorrect residence address: forms are not clear that "residence" refers to the home state residence rather than the school-year residence. (3) Using forms for the wrong state. Many states do not print their own state name on their own form. These common errors could be easily prevented by future drive organizers, or by operators of the resource websites, now that they are identified.

Most of the errors or failures by county boards of elections were one of these: (1) Sending out absentee ballots too late. Los Angeles County, in particular, sent out many ballots too late.³² (2) Mysterious disappearance, lack of response, or erroneous rejection. Some instances were quite egregious, but our sample size does not permit reliable identification of a pattern for particular jurisdictions.

7. Implications

Our results show the effectiveness of a person-to-person voter drive promoting absentee voting by college students. Such absentee voter drives have only recently become logistically practical, due to the availability of online resources. Anticipated problems with student motivation, follow-through, or the complexity of absentee voting simply did not materialize.

We were, however, frustrated by laws in Michigan and Louisiana that require first-time voters to either register in person or vote in person. These laws selectively disenfranchise college students, many of whom are away from home in the months immediately preceding the first election in which they are eligible to vote.

We hope our results will encourage organizers of future voter drives on college campuses to give students a choice of home state or college state registration and voting. We found that students generally prefer home state voting, particularly if their home states are swing states, and that they do successfully register and vote absentee. Students are highly aware of the different value of their vote in different states, and will act to optimize the impact of their vote when a person-to-person registration campaign facilitates doing so.

The student preference for absentee voting – especially in swing states – suggests the possible political impact of absentee voter drives held on college campuses that are not in swing states. These campuses have largely been ignored by partisan and non-partisan voter drives alike, despite the potential for “away” students to play a role in their home states' elections.

We, the authors of this study, strongly believe in the value of civic engagement and the importance of drawing young adults into the political process. For us, situated in a state that was not a close contest in the 2008 presidential election, no more rewarding or effective local activity could be imagined than to increase the student vote total in other states.

³² Seven out of 39 applicants for absentee voting in Los Angeles County received their ballots too late to vote.

8. Acknowledgements

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CIRCLE (The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement) conducts research on the civic and political engagement of Americans between the ages of 15 and 25.

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