2008 Survey of the Performance of American Elections[*]

Final Report

Executive Summary[†]

The 2008 Survey of the Performance of American Elections is the first comprehensive nationwide study of how voters experienced the administration of elections in the United States. The main part of the survey involved interviewing 10,000 registered voters (200 in each state) over the Internet. An additional 2,000 registered voters were interviewed in ten states, providing the opportunity to compare how interview respondents answer questions about election administration in these two survey modes.

The 2008 election was a positive experience for the vast majority of American voters

For the vast majority of voters in 2008, the Election Day experience went smoothly:

- 98% of respondents said it was "very easy" or "fairly easy" to find their polling place.
- 98% said their polling place was run "very well" or "Ok, with only minor problems."
- 96% said that poll worker performance was either "excellent" (70%) or very good (26%).
- Less than 2% witnessed problems at their polling place that could have interfered with people being able to vote.
- Fewer than 2% of voters experienced registration problems.
- Fewer than 2% of voters reported problems with the voting equipment.
- 4% said they waited in line for more than an hour on Election Day.

Voting before Election Day became much more common in 2008, compared to the past. Overall, 37% of voters cast their ballots before Election Day, either in-person at early voting centers (18%) or by mail, mainly via absentee ballots (19%). The elderly, individuals with disabilities, and better-educated voters were more likely to use these "convenience voting" methods.

Absentee and mail-in voters overwhelmingly had good experiences in 2008. Fewer than 2% of absentee voters stated that they had a problem getting their ballot. Just over 3% of absentee voters needed assistance in casting their ballot.

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[†] Authors: R. Michael Alvarez (Caltech); Stephen Ansolabehere (Harvard University and MIT); Adam Berinsky, Gabriel Lenz, and Charles Stewart III (MIT); and Thad Hall (University of Utah). Please direct correspondence and question to Charles Stewart III, Department of Political Science, MIT, cstewart@mit.edu.

The 2000 and 2004 elections featured major controversies over the performance of voting machines, both punch cards and direct recording electronic (DRE) devices. In 2008, voters reported very few problems with voting machines. Only 2% of voters reported experiencing problems using their voting equipment. Voters using DREs reported experiencing problems voting at the same rates as those using optically scanned ballots.

When asked, "How confident are you that your vote in the General Election was counted as you intended," 94% stated they were either "very confident" (72%) or "somewhat confident" (22%). Election Day voters were more confident their votes were counted as intended than early voters or absentee/mail-in voters. African-American voters (95%) were somewhat more likely to state they were "very confident" or "somewhat confident" their votes were counted as cast, compared to White (91%) and Hispanic (81%) voters.

Areas of concern — lines, registration, and voter ID

Lines were minimal for most voters, although 1-in-20 encountered waits of over an hour. Because Early Voting has been touted as a way to make voting more convenient, it is ironic that early voters waited longer in line than Election Day voters. (See Table 1.)

Table 1.

Line length	Election Day	Early voting
Not at all	41%	29%
< 10 min.	28%	26%
10-30 min.	17%	23%
30-60 min.	10%	13%
> 1 hour	4%	8%

Question: Approximately, how long did you have to wait in line to vote?

Two percent of respondents encountered registration problems when they voted in person, a fraction that was identical whether respondents voted early or on Election Day. One-quarter of those who encountered registration problems report that they voted via provisional ballot, which implies that approximately 500,000 provisional ballots were cast in 2008 due to registration problems.

Voter identification laws were unevenly implemented across states. In the states that do not require photo ID in order to vote, one-quarter of all voters stated they were asked to show a photo ID at their polling place. In states that require all voters to show photo identification, roughly one-quarter of voters said they showed photo identification not because it was required but because it was convenient. African Americans and Hispanics were asked to show "picture ID" more often than Whites were — 70% for African Americans, 65% for Hispanics, and 51% for Whites.

Reasons for not voting — demographic and administrative factors

The 2008 Survey of the Performance of American Elections was conducted among registered voters. Respondents who answered that they did not vote in 2008 were asked why they did not vote, and given a battery of 14 reasons, to which they could respond that a reason was a "major reason," a "minor reason" or "not a reason" why the respondent failed to vote.

The most common "major reasons" pertained to personal characteristics and attitudes, such as not liking the candidates (31% of non-voters), being too busy (23%), or illness (16%). Among reasons that pertain to administrative matters, the most common were registration problems (13%), did not receive ballot on time (12%), and lines were too long (11%). (See Table 2 for a summary of reasons given for not voting. Respondents could list more than one factor.)

Table 2.

	Major Factor	Minor Factor	Not A Factor
Didn't Like Choices	31%	12%	57%
Too Busy	23%	10%	68%
Illness	16%	5%	79%
Transportation	14%	5%	80%
Out of Town	14%	4%	82%
Registration Problems	13%	7%	80%
Did not receive ballot/not on time	12%	4%	84%
Line too long	11%	9%	80%
Bad Time/Location	10%	10%	80%
Didn't know where to go	9%	10%	80%
Did Not Receive Absentee Ballot	8%	4%	88%
Wrong Identification	7%	3%	90%
Forgot	5%	4%	91%
Weather	3%	5%	92%

Question: How much of a factor did the following reasons play in your not voting in the November General Election? (items rotated)

Forty percent of non-voters listed only personal reasons for their decision not to vote, 13% listed only administrative reasons, and 25% listed a combination of personal and administrative reasons. The remaining respondents did not choose any of these categories.

State-by-state experience

The sampling strategy of the survey was designed to facilitate comparisons across states in the quality of the voting experience. In seven states — Massachusetts, Michigan, Montana, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Pennsylvania, and South Dakota — fewer than 2% of voting respondents reported encountering at least one problem when they voted, excluding those who encountered long lines. (Voters encountering a problem are defined as those who reported having a "very difficult" or "somewhat difficult" time finding their polling place; encountering a problem with voter registration; having a problem with the voting machine; or encountering a "poor" poll worker.) More than 10% of voting respondents from California and Washington reported encountering a problem when they voted.

Special topics in election administration — age, race, residency, and attitudes toward fraud and reform

In addition to gauging the experience of voters in the 2008 election, the final report analyzes the experience of voters broken down by age, race, and length of current residence. The report also measures attitudes of registered voters about election fraud and election reform proposals.

Older respondents were more likely to turn out and vote than younger voters. Older voters also reported more positive experiences voting on all questions asked but one — whether

they had problems with voting equipment. Older non-voters were more likely to report illness as a reason for not voting, while younger non-voters were more likely to cite "being too busy."

Most aspects of polling place operation show no appreciable differences across racial groups. African Americans and Whites reported similar levels of confidence that their votes would be counted as cast — 91% of Whites and 95% of Blacks said they were "very confident" or "somewhat confident." A lower level, 81%, of Hispanics expressed similar levels of confidence that their votes would be counted as cast.

The two areas of significant racial discrepancies were in reported waiting times to vote and being asked to show photo identification. Twenty-nine percent of African Americans reported waiting more than 30 minutes to vote, compared to 14% for Whites and 15% for Hispanics.

Half (51%) of White voters, 70% of Black voters, and 65% of Hispanic voters were asked to show photo identification. State laws account for most of this variance, since African Americans are more likely to live in states with stringent ID requirements. However, even accounting for differences in laws, discrepancies remain. The discrepancies are the greatest in states that have the *least* stringent voter identification laws. In states with stricter identification laws (that allow or require that poll workers request ID), 83% of White respondents reported that they were asked for picture ID, compared to 89% of African American respondents and 75% of Hispanics. In states with less strong identification laws, 22% of White respondents were asked for picture ID, compared to 44% of African Americans and 51% of Hispanic respondents.

The United States is a highly mobile society. The median length of stay in a residence among Americans is just over five years. Respondents to the survey who had lived in their current residence for less than five years experienced slightly more difficulty voting than those had lived in their current residence a longer time. One-in-four non-voters (23%) who lived in their residence less than a year cited voting registration problems as "a major reason" for not voting; only 8% of non-voters who lived in their residence at least 5 years said that registration problems were a "major reason" for their non-participation. Length of residence also had the greatest influence on whether respondents experienced registration and identification problems. About half of respondents who had lived in their current residence a year or less reported that they do not have a driver's license that shows their current name or address, compared to only 10% of respondents living five years or more in their current address.

Respondents to the survey were often uncertain about how often vote fraud (defined as voting more than once), vote theft (stealing or tampering with votes), and voter impersonation occurred in their communities. Among those who expressed an opinion about these matters, 12% said that voter fraud was very common, 9% said that vote theft was very common, and 8% said voter impersonation was very common. Republicans were more likely to express beliefs that vote fraud and voter impersonation were major problems in their communities. (See Table 3.)

Majorities expressed support for requiring all voters to show identification in order to vote (74%) and making Election Day a national holiday (58%). They were split 50/50 on the proposition of automatically registering all citizens to vote, and failed to give majorities to proposals to move Election Day to the weekend (43% supporting), Election Day registration (42%), absentee voting over the Internet (32%), and running elections by mail (16%). Although only a minority nationwide supported Election Day Registration (EDR), large majorities of respondents from states that currently have EDR supported the practice.

Table 3

	Democrats	Republicans
Voter fraud	6%	19%
Vote theft	8%	9%
Voter impersonation	4%	11%

Questions:
(Entries are percentage of respondents responding "it is very common" to the following questions, among those expressing an opinion.)

- (Voter fraud) It is illegal to vote more than once in an election or to vote if not a U.S. citizen. How frequently do you think this occurs in your community?
- (Vote theft) Another form of fraud occurs when votes are stolen or tampered with. How frequently do you think this occurs in your community?
- (Voter impersonation) It is illegal for a person to claim to be another person, who is registered to vote, and to cast that person's vote. How often do you think this occurs in your community?

Lost votes due to administrative problems

Results from the survey can be used to estimate roughly how many votes were "lost" in 2008 due to administrative problems, such as registration problems and long lines. Approximately 3 million registered voters appear to have been excluded from voting because of registration problems, 2 million could not find where to vote, 2 million did not have proper identification, and between 2 and 3 million encountered lines that were too long. Perhaps 3 million potential absentee votes were lost because requested ballots never arrived. While these are ballpark figures, and there may be some double counting due to people reporting multiple problems, they suggest that a significant fraction of non-voters might be brought into the electorate through administrative improvements to elections.

Comparisons of Internet and telephone respondents

One goal of this survey was to study how respondents who were administered the questionnaire via the Internet differed from those who responded via telephone. Internet respondents had slightly higher income and education levels than telephone respondents did. Internet respondents were slightly more liberal and more Democratic than phone respondents were. The biggest demographic difference was age, with Internet voters being six years younger, on average.

Voters who responded to the Internet survey reported voting experiences that were very similar to those who responded via telephone. Phone respondents were slightly more positive about their voting experience, but the differences were small. The biggest differences between telephone and Internet respondents were in attitudes about voter fraud and election reform. Telephone respondents were much more likely to volunteer that vote fraud, vote theft, and voter impersonation "never occurs" in their communities. Internet respondents were also much more likely to report support for reforms to make voting easier.