



Missouri Legislative Academy

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Background:

In Missouri, advance or early voting has been considered by the General Assembly not necessarily because it may increase turnout, but because it is convenient for voters and could ease the problems of election administration such as those experienced in St. Louis.

Historically, voters across the nation have been allowed to vote absentee, primarily due to illness or absence from the jurisdiction on Election Day.¹ Early or advance voting is a relatively recent development that permits voters to vote before Election Day for any reason. They may vote at a

satellite location (such as a mall, grocery store or library), at the county clerk’s office (or the election board office in jurisdictions with election boards), or other county office, as determined by the “election authority”.² Some states offer liberalized absentee voting, where voters may vote absentee, often by mail, with no excuse at all as an alternative to early voting. These mechanisms offer somewhat different opportunities and present different challenges than advance voting but, more importantly, they are not under consideration in Missouri. Consequently, they are not examined here.

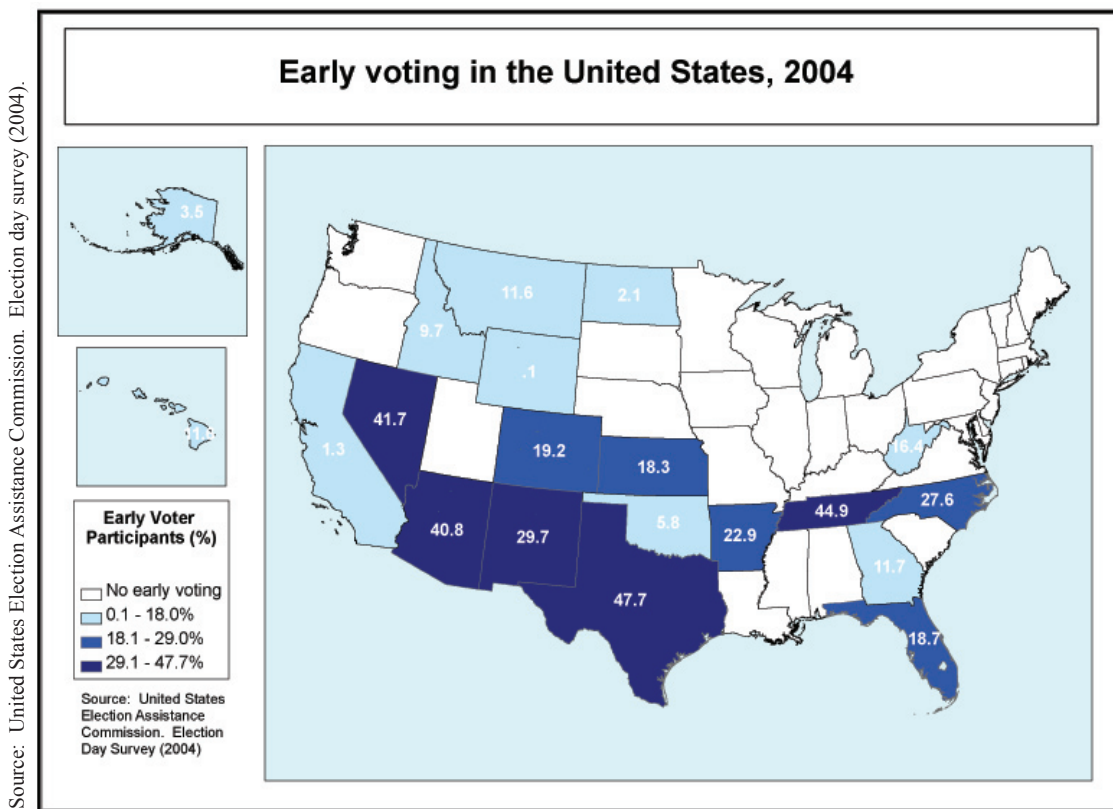


Figure 1

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¹ See Section 115.277, RSMo, for Missouri’s accepted reasons for absentee voting.

² The county clerk in most counties and the election board in Clay, Jackson, Platte, St. Charles, and St. Louis counties as well as Kansas City and St. Louis city.

While different states may define the concept of advance voting differently, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures and the Election Assistance Commission, 30 states offered the option to vote before Election Day with no excuse (early in person and absentee with no excuse) in the 2004 election, up from 26 in 2002 (see figure 1). Twenty-two will offer “early voting” for the midterm election in 2006. According to the Election Assistance Commission’s *Election Day Survey*, 23.5 percent of ballots cast nationally were cast “early” in 2004, compared to 14 percent in the 2000 general election, and my data analysis indicates that only nine percent voted before Election Day in the 1996 election.

This brief provides an overview of early voting issues in Missouri, and assesses the value and implications of early voting in Missouri.

Current Situation in Missouri

SB 675, enacted in 2002, required each election authority to develop a plan for early voting and to submit the estimated cost of implementation to the office of the Secretary of State (see 115.126, RSMo). However, the act did not explicitly authorize advance voting. In 2006, SB 859 and HB 1355 both proposed advance voting for a period beginning the third Wednesday before the election and ending at the end of the Wednesday before the election, beginning in 2008. Under these bills, the names of those voting, but not their vote, may be released to the campaigns and the parties on the Friday before the election.³ Alternatively, SB 1014 moves in the opposite direction by repealing the provisions of SB 675 relating to the development of plans for early voting, thereby completely removing references to early voting from Missouri. This bill was Truly Agreed To in 2006 but early voting could be approved by future legislation.

Arguments In Favor of Early Voting

There are several arguments in favor of early or advance voting.

1. Early voting may increase turnout, especially among those who may not be able to get to the polls on Election Day. There is some limited evidence that states with early/advance voting had a slightly higher turnout in 2004 than states without early voting, according to the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate, although evidence from the Election Assistance Commission, 2004 Election Day survey suggests turnout was actually lower in states that allowed voting before Election Day. When examining state or county-level data, scholarly research has generally found small positive effects on turnout within certain early voting states. Examining whether an individual citizen is more likely to vote (as opposed to data from the entire state or election district), the best research finds that early voting causes only

small increases, and usually only where political parties are working hard to mobilize voters. One study (in Texas) found the mobilization effect only for Democrats, probably because many Republican voters were likely to vote anyway (Stein, Owens and Leighley, 2003: 17, 20). I will return to this point below.

2. Some proponents hope that early voting will relieve potential long lines on Election Day, which have plagued areas such as St. Louis. Early/advance voting may make election administration easier as well because it stretches the administration of an election over a longer time period.

3. It is a simple convenience for voters. Although Missouri law allows voters three hours off from work to vote, early voting makes it easier to find the time to vote.⁴

Arguments Against Advance Voting

There are several arguments in opposition to early voting.

1. Early voting may not increase turnout after all—it only makes it a little easier to vote for those who would vote anyway. One can see this point if one compares the characteristics of early/advance with Election Day voters. The differences between the two are that early voters are more likely to be more highly educated, older and strong partisans who have already decided for whom to vote. This is the conclusion of a variety of research, including my comparison of voters who voted before and on Election Day in Arkansas (with early voting) and Missouri (with limited absentee voting). Other than that, my research indicates that Election Day and early voters are similar on many factors. Early voting mobilizes very few people who would not have voted otherwise.

2. Some argue early voting will ultimately reduce turnout. In this view, early voting may have negative effects on the civic exercise of Election Day, eventually reducing turnout. Many experts argue that Election Day is a citizenship “event” where the feeling of civic duty compels some portion of the population to vote. Pre-election day voting may reduce the feelings of civic pride surrounding this special day, ultimately reducing turnout. This perspective is purely speculative at this point, without supporting evidence.

3. Early voting may relieve long lines on Election Day, but will require more resources (more funds and more poll workers, both already in short supply). With changes in voting equipment required in Missouri (most election authorities have used punch card ballots made famous in the Florida presidential recount), most local budgets for elections are already stretched thin, even with federal funding of voting equipment.

³ Both bills were heard in committee but neither was voted out of committee.

⁴ Section 115.639, RSMo allows employees three hours off, with pay, to vote and it is an election offence if the employer fails to permit an employee to take that time.

4. Voters do not all arrive at the polls on Election Day with the same information, of course, but dramatic developments late in the campaign can alter the information available and may significantly affect voting decisions on Election Day. Consider for example, the death of Governor and candidate for U. S. Senate Mel Carnahan in Missouri in 2000 or the death of Senator Paul Wellstone of Minnesota just before the election in 2004. In the former case, the Governor remained on the ballot although it was understood that his wife, Jean, would be appointed to replace him if he were elected while in the latter another candidate was named. In either case, had early voting been allowed, the early voters would have made their choice based upon facts that were no longer true on Election Day.

5. It may make campaign organizing more difficult and expensive as political parties, interest groups and candidates decide how and when to allocate their resources and it will certainly alter campaign tactics in unforeseeable ways.

6. Although not a consideration of the merits of the proposal, the Missouri Association of County Clerks and Election Authorities has expressed concern about the costs associated with early voting. The Association supports advance voting in concept, but argues that the General Assembly should “be responsible for any additional costs incurred in establishing and implementing an advanced voting program in Missouri”, not the counties and cities that administer state elections. (Advance Voting Principles, Missouri Association of County Clerks and Election Officials, July 2005). Their position is supported by Missouri’s tax limitation measure, especially Article X, Section 21, which prohibits the state from imposing a new activity or increasing the level of an activity or service on local governments without providing the funds to support it.⁵ The fiscal note for the early voting legislation indicates a local cost of \$710,993 in FY 09 (July 2008-June 2009), to fund early voting in the 2008 state primary and general elections.

Conclusion:

Early or advance voting differs from absentee voting in that for those voting absentee, the choice is to vote absentee or not vote. Early voting is more of a convenience than a need. In addition, early voting may have unintended effects upon the campaign strategies and voter mobilization strategies of political parties, candidate campaigns and interest groups. Under these circumstances, there is little harm and may be great benefit to observing how early voting works in other states before adopting it in Missouri.

Resources:

“Advance Voting Principles.” Missouri Association of County Clerks and Election Officials. July 20, 2005.

Kropf, Martha, Janine Parry, Jay Barth and E. Terrence Jones. “Pursuing the Early Voter: Does the Early Bird Get the Worm?” Article forthcoming in *Journal of Political Marketing*.

“Move to Allow Early Voting Pits St. Louis Against Secretary of State.” PBS Online News Hour. Available at: http://www.pbs.org/newshour/vote2004/demconvention/mo_voting.htm.

Stein, Robert, Chris Owens, and Jan Leighley. 2003. “The Role of Candidates and Parties in Linking Electoral Reforms with Voter Participation.” Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL, April 3-6, 2003, available at: <http://mpsa.indiana.edu/conf2003papers/1032118974.pdf>.

The Century Foundation. 2005. *Balancing Access and Integrity: The Report of The Century Foundation Working Group on State Implementation of Election Reform*. <http://www.reformelections.org/publications.asp?pubid=542>.

United States Election Assistance Commission. Election Day Survey. http://www.eac.gov/election_survey_2004/intro.htm.

Author Biography

Dr. Martha Kropf is an Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, but will begin teaching at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte in the fall, 2006. She has written several articles about election reform and voting equipment. She has also served on the Social Science Research Council’s National Research Commission on Elections and Voting and served on the Working Group on State Implementation of Election Reform, sponsored by the Century Foundation. Along with Dr. David Kimball at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, Dr. Kropf is currently working on a National Science Foundation study of ballot layout and design.

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⁵ This is commonly called the “Hancock Amendment,” see Article X, Sections 16-24 of the Missouri Constitution for the full amendment.