

# **“Hey, Sorry I’m Early”: In-Person Voting Before Election Day**

July 8, 2009

*BACKGROUND: The following papers on election-related topics were a product of a 2009 summer internship program of the El Paso County Clerk & Recorder’s office. Extensive research and writing of these articles was performed by Brian Brown, under the direction of Robert Balink, El Paso County Clerk & Recorder, and with support of the election department staff. Brian served as an intern in the office from June through early September 2009. Brian was a 2007 graduate of Princeton University and in December 2007 also a graduate of the John Jay Institute for Faith, Society and Law, in Colorado Springs, Colorado. He then served at The Heritage Foundation in Washington, D.C. prior to becoming a summer intern at the El Paso County Clerk & Recorder’s Office. Brian Brown is currently serving as a fellow at the El Pomar Foundation in Colorado Springs, Colorado.*

*Election debacles in the last decade have raised a cry for reform. Innovations have included guards against fraud, but an increasing number of states have also implemented systems aimed at making it easier to vote. One such system is early in-person voting, in which voters can go to certain polling places in the days or weeks before the election and cast their vote. In 2004, 8% of American voters took advantage of this opportunity.<sup>1</sup> Proponents argue that the convenience of being able to skip the lines made people more inclined to vote. They also claim the system eased the burden on election officials, who were left with smaller crowds on Election Day. Experts disagree on whether early in-person voting lowers or raises costs, but proponents argue that regardless, it is a convenience worth having.*

## **The Argument against Early In-Person Voting**

Is there really a point to having an “Election Day” if increasingly few people actually vote on that day? No—not if we want ignorant citizens voting before they know about the candidates, and not if we want elections to be an expensive pain for election officials. The fact is, early in-person voting is an unnecessary expense.

Study after study has shown that early in-person voting does not increase turnout—some people do think ahead and vote early, but they are nearly always people who were going to vote anyway.<sup>2</sup> So it’s really about convenience.<sup>3</sup> Are the costs really worth the benefits?

**Early Voting Promotes Ignorant Voting.** Imagine you were one of the people who voted a week early for George H. W. Bush in 1992. Four days before the election, news broke that he lied about his involvement in the Iran-Contra arms sales. You wanted to change your vote. Too bad—you already cast your ballot. And so did millions of other people.<sup>4</sup>

Not only did you vote before you knew the same facts as everybody else, you also pushed your country to the backburner. The rest of America got up on Election Day and experienced the civic ritual of citizens voting together—reminding themselves that it is the people who are sovereign in America.<sup>5</sup> You, on the other hand, were like the baseball fan who never actually watches the games—he just checks the score at the end. Is that really the conception of citizenship we want to encourage?

**Early Voting Makes Elections Expensive and a Hassle for Officials.** While lines on Election Day might be marginally shorter because a few people voted early, election officials won't usually appreciate it. By then, they will already have spent weeks staffing the early polling places, either doing so themselves or paying outside people to do the job. Either way, it keeps them from preparing for the big day and costs money. Between absentee balloting and long poll hours on Election Day, there is already plenty for administrators to do, and plenty of opportunities for voters to cast their ballots without any great inconvenience.

Opening polling places early might make voting slightly friendlier to a small number of people, but those people will be voting ignorantly and such a system promotes further ignorance—even civic apathy. Meanwhile, political parties will have a harder time informing the voters, and a harder time mobilizing them. And election officials will spend extra time, money and work cleaning up the mess. The convenience added by early voting is marginal, and the slight convenience to a few voters is not worth the inconvenience to everyone else.

### **The Argument for Early In-Person Voting**

Enfranchising citizens is more important than any inconvenience. Early in-person voting makes it easier to vote, and there is some evidence that it can contribute to increased turnouts. And some election officials say it makes their jobs easier, not harder.

**Early Voting Increases Turnout.** Some initial studies have indicated that turnout did indeed increase in states that implemented early in-person voting. As time has gone on, increasing numbers of people have chosen to vote early. Colorado, for example, saw its early voting numbers (including absentees) increase from 775,000 in 2000 to 900,255 in 2004.<sup>6</sup> We should not eliminate a voting option that is so obviously popular.

And a person who chooses to vote early is not ignorant—he is smart, for thinking ahead. He goes through the same process as everyone else, just a little earlier. A few things can certainly happen in the days between, but important news about candidates always comes to light after Election Day, too—they are no more likely to happen the day before the election (in fact, they are less likely, since the candidates are carefully trying to win an election).

**Early Voting Makes Voting Easier on Everyone.** An early voter does not have to worry about taking time off work, getting transportation to the polling place at rush hour, waiting in a long line, or accidentally marking the wrong name in a high-pressure moment of finally voting. This makes things easier for voters who choose the option, and easier for voters who don't choose it (because their lines are shorter too). It also encourages people to vote who might otherwise be turned off by the hassle of it all.<sup>7</sup> All

these benefits can certainly begin to explain why at least one study suggests early voting can lead to higher turnout.<sup>8</sup>

Early voting can even make matters easier for harried election officials. They have more time to process ballots, and shorter lines to face. Fewer people each day means administrators are more likely to be able to handle voters with their own (better-trained) staffs, and less likely to need to hire outside help.<sup>9</sup>

Ultimately, in this case, convenience and enfranchisement go hand in hand. Making life easier for voters makes them more likely to participate, and spreads out the work so that election officials aren't as swamped on Election Day. More Americans participating in elections means more participation in self-government—not less. It is a goal for which we should strive, and early in-person voting is a good step towards that goal.

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<sup>1</sup> John Fortier, "Absentee Balloting for Convenience," *Philadelphia Inquirer* (November 2, 2006), at <http://www.aei.org/article/25087>

<sup>2</sup> John Mark Hansen, "Early Voting, Unrestricted Absentee Voting, and Voting By Mail," Task Force on the Federal Election System, p. 4, at [http://www.tcf.org/Publications/ElectionReform/NCFER/hansen\\_chap5\\_early.pdf](http://www.tcf.org/Publications/ElectionReform/NCFER/hansen_chap5_early.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Commission on Federal Electoral Reform, "Building Confidence in U.S. Elections," September 2005, p. 33, at [www.american.edu/iacfer/report/full\\_report.pdf](http://www.american.edu/iacfer/report/full_report.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Curtis Gans, "Making It Easier Doesn't Work: No Excuse Absentee and Early Voting Hurt Voter Turnout," Center for the Study of the American Electorate, September 13, 2004, p. 4, at [http://www.american.edu/ia/cfer/research/csae\\_09132004.pdf](http://www.american.edu/ia/cfer/research/csae_09132004.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Curtis Gans, "Making It Easier Doesn't Work," p. 6

<sup>6</sup> Jim Drinkard, "Long lines on Election Day enhance appeal of early voting," *USA Today* (17 November 2004), at [http://www.usatoday.com/news/politicselections/2004-11-17-early-voting\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/politicselections/2004-11-17-early-voting_x.htm)

<sup>7</sup> Paul Gronke et al, "Early Voting and Turnout," Early Voting Information Center (2008), p. 2, at <http://www.earlyvoting.net/resources/ohio07.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> John Mark Hansen, "Early Voting, Unrestricted Absentee Voting, and Voting By Mail," p. 6

<sup>9</sup> John Mark Hansen, "Early Voting, Unrestricted Absentee Voting, and Voting By Mail," p. 8