



Effects of Motor Voter Different Car: Same Driver?

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Introduction

The National Voting Rights Act is the most sweeping reform of voter registration procedures ever undertaken. It took effect on 1/1/95, and there has been much speculation already about the changes in the electorate that the act may be producing.

The act is frequently referred to as the "Motor Voter" act because it mandates the availability of voter registration at DMV's nationwide, but there are a variety of other provisions which are also included. Some of these, such as the mandated availability of voter registration at welfare offices and Armed Forces recruiting offices, have not been widely used, and it is difficult to estimate what their impact will be. It is generally acknowledged that the largest effects in terms of numbers will come from the two major ingredients of the act-- Motor Voter and severe restrictions on local official's right to purge non-voters.

These two provision have been implemented in a number of states over the last decade, and there is a variety of general information available on the changes to the electorate as a result of these laws. In particular, they were both included in the "Motor Voter" statute implemented in Colorado in January, 1985. In El Paso County the clerk marked individuals who registered at the DMV from 1/85 through 9/91. This allows us to compare the individuals who registered at the Clerk with those who registered at the DMV during that period, and answer three important questions about the impact of motor voter on the electorate.

1. Does the increased convenience of allowing persons to register at the DMV promote the registration of persons who would not have registered through the traditional programs of the clerk and recorders office? If so then one would expect the DMV voters to be somewhat different from those registered by the clerk in age, gender, and party, and; the distribution of registrants to be somewhat different in terms of age, gender and party affiliation after motor voter is implemented than before.

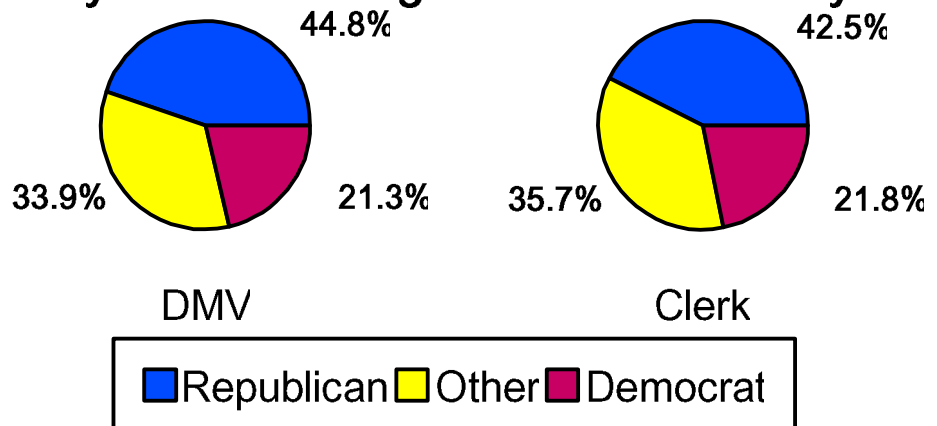
2. Do those registered to vote at the DMV actually vote in elections at or near the same rate as those registered to vote by the clerk's office?

3. Have the changes in the Colorado law extending registration at the DMV and restrictions on purging substantially increased the number of persons registered to vote and/or the number of persons participating in general elections, and has it changed the proportional representation by party, gender, and age of those actually voting in Colorado elections?

No significant differences are observable

The data in Table 1 show the characteristics of voters and the extent to which these differ for those registering during the period of this study. The Table also compares the characteristics of those registering with the clerk and recorders office to those registering at the DMV. Of the 187,536 registered voters, over 41% registered during this seven year period, with slightly less than half registering with the clerk (46.5%) and slightly over half registering at the DMV (53.5%). Clearly, people are taking advantage of the opportunity to register while obtaining a driver's license, and most new registrations are occurring at the DMV. So if DMV registration effectively enrolls a substantial number of those who otherwise might not do so, one might expect significant increases in the representation of various characteristics of voters which are often associated with low rates of electoral participation, i.e.,

Figure I: Voting in the 1992 General Election
by Place of Registration and Party



democrats and unaffiliated Vs republicans; females Vs males; Spanish Vs Jewish surnamed; those without phones Vs those with, and so on.

However, no such significant differences are observable on the Table and such slight differences as do occur do not seem to be the result of DMV registration. Although there is an increase in the proportion of unaffiliated voters during the period of the study, this increase is equally divided between DMV and traditional registrants. It would seem the gain in independents is not the result of motor voter, but reflects a combination of a general slight trend toward increasing unaffiliated registration across all groups, and the tendency of younger persons registering for the first time to do so as unaffiliated voters. In addition, a larger percentage registered Republican at the DMV, while a larger percentage registered Democrat with traditional methods -- the opposite of the expected effect. Females are slightly less likely to register at the DMV than males, but there is virtually no difference in the overall representation of males and females between the total file of voters and only those registering since the motor voter act was implemented. And although Jewish and Spanish surnamed persons are at times thought to be at the opposite ends of the economic spectrum, they are equally represented in registrations with the DMV and with the clerk.

Although younger persons are much more likely to be both unregistered and to need to obtain a driver's license than older ones, the differences in place of registration by age group are not great, being at the extremes only about 6.0% , with those under 25 comprising only 4.1% of the clerk registrations but 10.6% for the DMV, and those over 65 reversing the pattern, at 10.4% and 6.4% respectively. The greater representation of those under 35 years of age during the 1985-91 time period than the over all total is then not so much the result of the motor voter act as the tendency

for more recent registrants to be younger and general demographic trends in the population. The same issues of age and recent registration are also related to the proportion of registrants who have a phone although this variable has the greatest difference in marginal totals between the two groups and does suggest that to some limited extent, DMV may be registering some small number of persons who are different from those who are and would likely be registered by the clerk's office.

Traditional Findings Confirmed

The data in Table 2 show the extent to which those registering at DMV voted in the 1992 general election compared to the rate of participation of those registered through the office of the county clerk. The rate for DMV registrants is 62.3% or 8.3% lower than the 74.5 % rate for those registering with the clerk's office.

The data in the Table confirm the traditional findings for the characteristics of those less likely to vote, with those unaffiliated by party, those with Spanish surnames, those under 35 years of age, and those registered in 1989 or 1990 voting at rates substantially less than average. Interestingly these groups with lower rates of voting also show the greatest falloff in voting rates for those registered at the DMV compared to those registering at the clerk's office. Unaffiliated voters who registered at DMV vote at a rate 9.2% less than unaffiliated voters who registered with the clerk, while the greatest difference is demonstrated for Spanish surname voters whose DMV registrants voted at a rate 12.1% lower than their counterparts registering with the clerk. By contrast, older voters, Democrats, those with a phone, and those registered for a long period of time show the least difference in turnout rate in relation to place of registration. With the exception of Republicans, those groups with slightly higher rates of registration through the DMV also are those groups with

substantially lower rates of participation in the general election.

Consequences of Motor Voter

Since the possible impact of motor voter on elections would be the product of changes in both registration and participation, the best overall measure of whether it has made any substantial difference would be the percentage of various groups who participate in elections. **Figure I: Voting in the 1992 General Election by Place of Registration and Party** provides a convenient summary of the net effects of all changes in registration procedures, including restrictions on purging and DMV, over the eight year time span of the study. Although there are some slight differences in the mix of partisan registration between the DMV and the Clerk, these differences are not significant when election participation is taken into consideration.

Summary and Conclusions

Motor Voter has not significantly changed the characteristics of persons registered to vote in Colorado. One group which showed a greater

TABLE 1: Characteristics of Voters by Place of Registrarior

	Aug '92		Register 1/85 through 8/91						
	Tota		Tota		At DMV		At Clerk		Dif
	Reg	%	Rec	%	Reg	%	Reg	%	
All	187,53€	1.00	76,993	0.41	41,207	0.54	35,78€	0.47	0.07
Party Affiliation									
Republican	80,962	0.43	31,805	0.41	17,40€	0.42	14,402	0.40	0.02
Democrat	42,845	0.23	16,000	0.21	8,370	0.20	7,63€	0.21	(0.01)
Other	63,739	0.34	29,188	0.3€	15,434	0.38	13,764	0.39	(0.01)
Gender									
Male	88,162	0.47	36,839	0.4€	19,73€	0.48	17,10€	0.48	0.00
Female	99,384	0.53	40,154	0.52	21,477	0.52	18,677	0.52	0.00
Ethnicity									
Spanish Sr.	10,332	0.06	4,341	0.0€	2,288	0.06	2,05€	0.06	0.00
Jewish	10,052	0.05	4,116	0.0€	2,244	0.0€	1,872	0.05	0.00
Age									
<25	12,193	0.07	5,826	0.0€	4,373	0.11	1,45€	0.04	0.07
25-34	33,452	0.18	20,576	0.27	11,847	0.2€	8,72€	0.24	0.04
35-44	46,662	0.25	23,249	0.30	11,981	0.2€	11,26€	0.32	(0.02)
45-54	37,826	0.20	14,870	0.1€	7,448	0.18	7,42€	0.21	(0.03)
55-64	24,482	0.13	6,109	0.0€	2,929	0.07	3,18€	0.09	(0.02)
65 and >	32,921	0.18	6,363	0.0€	2,629	0.0€	3,734	0.10	(0.04)
Has Phone	162,09€	0.86	63,856	0.8€	32,661	0.7€	31,19€	0.87	(0.08)

tendency to register at the DMV was the one with which the act was least concerned -- Republicans. However, younger persons register at rates 6.6% higher with the DMV than with the Clerk, suggesting some possible gains in attracting younger persons to register. This is however more than offset by the lower rate of voting for those who register at the DMV versus those registering with the clerk. DMV registrants voted in the 1992 general election at an over all rate that was 8.3% lower than for those registering with the clerk. This difference was more pronounced for precisely those groups which generally show lower rates of participation: unaffiliated voters, Spanish surnamed voters, younger voters, and those registering in the immediately prior election cycle and those registering in the "off" year. And consistent with these, DMV registrants with a phone (an indicator of higher vote propensity) show less fall off in voting rates than average. Although Democrats who register at the DMV are more likely to vote than either Republicans or Unaffiliated, this gain is somewhat offset by the greater tendency of Republicans to register at the DMV. Furthermore the characteristics of those who do vote have not substantially changed since Motor Voter.

There are three conclusions based on these findings.

First, the opportunity to register at the DMV and the relaxation of the purge law have had little impact on the characteristics of persons registered to vote or on the characteristics of those who do vote.

Second, DMV registration has served as a "functional equivalent" to registration by the Clerk. It registers pretty much the same persons who would have been registered by the Clerk: people register there because it is merely more convenient. For that small group who do register solely due to DMV, it appears that participation in the elections is extremely low, with a negligible "net gain" in electoral participation.

Third, these findings imply a possible consequence of many efforts which attempt to increase participation or modify voter behavior, which might be summarized as the "displacement of means." Although the "ends" may be to increase registration or voting rates, the new method or the means become accepted because they are more efficient and convenient, not because they actually achieve their goal. And the means themselves may indeed contribute to increasing the problem rather than diminishing it.

Reforms Have Not Changed the Composition of the Electorate

It is clearly unwarranted to imply that the results of this one study in one perhaps unrepresentative county will apply equally to all programs of reform in voter registration in all areas of the nation. Increased confidence in the extent to which these findings do have at least some general implications regarding the consequences of the National Voter Rights Act is provided from similar findings in two prior VCS studies of changes in voter registration policies, one for Hawaii (B. Daly, VCS Journal, 8:1 "Motor Voters Starting to Arrive") and one for Denver (R. Hughes, VCS Journal, 8:2 "National Voting Rights Act"). Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, the findings support the general consensus among academic researchers that election reforms have not changed the

composition of the electorate (Rosenstone and Wolfinger, 1978: American Political Science Review), and confirm the prediction of Mitchell and Wiezien (1995, Political Behavior) that : "...there is no reason to expect recent innovations in registration laws, such as motor voter, to produce a different pattern...."(p. 196.)

It may be that Motor Voter, Absentee Voting, Early Voting, Vote by Mail, and many other "reforms" have in common an attractiveness to people who are comfortable with bureaucratic procedure -- who find the time to fill out forms conveniently, remember to keep appointments, and so on. These are also features of persons who have a high vote propensity, so these "means" will just displace the ones used by persons who were already going to vote anyway. For the poor, the mobile, the young, and especially for those who have reason to feel uncomfortable providing additional information within a government agency such as those in welfare offices and unemployment lines, there will be a longing for the "old" means -- a precinct worker, a neighbor, a family member -- which were more personal, more helpful, and less threatening. If parties and other political organizations reduce the investment in voter registration drives and get out the vote programs, and allow their efforts to be displaced by the new means, it is likely the overall rate of registration among these difficult to reach groups will decline, rather than increase, through the implementation of programs such as motor voter. Direct voter contact, identification of individual voter interests, competitive campaigns, and clarification of voters' understanding of how their interests are effected by the outcome of any particular election remain the key elements in determining the composition of the electorate and the rate of participation in elections, and these seem to be only marginally related, if at all, to the "ease" or "convenience" of registration or voting.

TABLE 2: Voted in 1992 General Election by Place of Registration (for those registered from 1/85 thru 8/91)

	All Voters	Clerk	DMV	% Dif
Total	66.2	70.6	62.3	8.3
Party Affiliation				
Republican	69.9	74.6	66.1	8.5
Democrat	68.6	72.2	65.3	6.9
Unaffiliated	60.8	65.6	56.4	9.2
Gender				
Male	66.4	70.8	62.7	8.1
Female	65.9	70.5	62.0	8.5
Ethnicity				
Spanish Sr.	60.6	67.0	54.9	12.1
Jewish Sr.	67.3	72.2	63.2	9.0
Age				
<25	48.2	53.2	46.6	6.6
25-34	54.7	58.9	51.6	7.3
35-44	71.0	74.3	67.9	6.4
45-54	75.0	77.7	72.2	5.5
55-64	75.6	79.1	71.8	7.3
66 >	72.7	72.5	73.0	(0.5)
Has Phone	68.5	71.9	65.3	6.6

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In this issue . . .

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- ❖ **No significant differences are observable between those who register at the Clerk and those who register with the DMV.**
- ❖ **Reforms have not changed the composition of the electorate.**

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VCS JOURNAL is published by
VOTER CONTACT SERVICES
the political computer people
6600 Kalaniana'ole Hwy, Suite 209
Honolulu, Hawaii 96825



(808) 396-7577

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