

# A Review of Academic Literature on the Effectiveness of the National Voter Registration Act

By Jody Herman, Douglas R. Hess, and Margaret Groarke



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## Introduction

Congress enacted the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) in 1993 to expand access to voter registration and thereby increase participation in elections. According to the House of Representatives' bill report:

*Enactment of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 eliminated the more obvious impediments to registration, but left a complicated maze of local laws and procedures, in some cases as restrictive as the outlawed practices, through which eligible citizens had to navigate in order to exercise their right to vote. The unfinished business of registration reform is to reduce these obstacles to voting to the absolute minimum while maintaining the integrity of the election process.<sup>2</sup>*

The Act's best known provision is its "motor voter" requirement, which instructs states to provide voter registration services simultaneously with driver's license application and renewal.<sup>3</sup> An equally important but less well-known provision is the requirement that states provide voter registration services at public assistance agencies and agencies that serve the disabled when clients apply for benefits, recertify their eligibility, or change their address.<sup>4</sup> Other reforms mandated by the NVRA include procedures that states must follow before cancelling a voter's registration, a uniform registration deadline 30 days before a federal election, and the use and acceptance of a simple mail registration form.<sup>5</sup>

Academic literature examining the effectiveness of the NVRA, not an extensive body, generally takes two approaches: analysis of NVRA impact on aggregate registration and/or turnout rates, and analysis of the NVRA's impact

## A Review of Academic Literature on the Effectiveness of the National Voter Registration Act

on equality in participation. While the positive effects of the NVRA on aggregate registration rates and on the registration of members of certain demographic groups is a consistent finding, the existing literature has several limitations, particularly concerning the public agency provisions of the NVRA.<sup>6</sup> Without more exact research, the importance of both the development of future polices and the enforcement of current polices to reduce inequalities in voter registration rates in the United States will be underestimated. Specific weaknesses of the existing research on the NVRA are:

- The research was conducted immediately following implementation of the NVRA or on policies that were only similar to the provisions in the NVRA;
- The studies did not review all provisions of the NVRA, with insufficient attention to those regarding public assistance agency registration and the purging of voters from the registration rolls;
- Researchers emphasized state-level turnout as an indicator of the NVRA's impact instead of individual-level outcomes making it difficult to measure the impact on various demographic groups;
- The wide variation in the thoroughness of the implementation of the NVRA across and within states was ignored in the research.

Further research on the NVRA is needed that uses appropriate indicators to assess its implementation, gives attention to its various components, and focuses on individual-level outcomes to better understand the Act's impact on particular demographic groups—the young, the poor, and people of color—who have long had lower-than-average rates of registration and participation.

### NVRA Impact on Aggregate Registration and Turnout

Most research on the NVRA—or on similar state policies prior to the NVRA—has focused on the Act's impact on aggregate voter turnout (Franklin & Grier, 1997; Highton & Wolfinger, 1998; Knack, 1999; Martinez & Hill, 1999; Rhine, 1996). Staci Rhine (1996), for example, predicted the NVRA's impact on state-level turnout by comparing motor voter states to non-motor voter states in the 1992 election. These studies differ on the degree to which the NVRA affected aggregate turnout, though all conclude that the impact was positive.

While academic research has given the most attention to aggregate voter turnout, some studies have also assessed the impact of the NVRA on aggregate voter registration (Brown & Wedeking, 2006; Franklin & Grier, 1997; Knack, 1995). For instance, in their study of elections from 1980 through 2004, Brown and Wedeking (2006) found that the NVRA had a positive impact on aggregate registration, with the largest registration gains in states with no motor voter provisions prior to the passage of the Act. Brown and Wedeking's findings are consistent with prior research that concluded that motor voter and other NVRA provisions would have a positive impact on voter registration, though a smaller positive impact on turnout.

### NVRA Impact on Equality in Participation

A significant goal of those who advocated for the passage of the NVRA was to effect equality in participation among the various voter-eligible demographic groups in the United States. Some academic studies on the effectiveness of the NVRA have looked at how it impacts various demographic groups and the representational bias of the electorate (Calvert, 1996; Highton, 1997; Hill, 2003; Martinez & Hill, 1999; Mitchell & Wlezian, 1995; Parry

## A Review of Academic Literature on the Effectiveness of the National Voter Registration Act

& Shields, 2001; Wolfinger & Hoffman, 2001). In contrast to the studies mentioned earlier and other studies on the representational bias of the electorate that focus on aggregate outcomes, both Wolfinger and Hoffman (2001) and Parry and Shields (2001) used individual-level data to assess the NVRA's impact on demographic groups.

Wolfinger and Hoffman (2001) used the 1996 Current Population Survey (CPS) Voting and Registration Supplement to cross-tabulate where people had registered with various demographic characteristics. They concluded that the public agency provision of the NVRA was effective in reaching the very demographic groups that Congress intended to assist with that provision: people with lower incomes or who are less educated. Parry and Shields (2001) found that delayed implementation of the NVRA had a different impact on men than women of various age groups in the 1996 electorate. The authors incorporated NVRA implementation into their model with a dummy variable representing those states that delayed implementation of the entire Act. They found that a delay in implementing the NVRA was associated with a significantly decreased likelihood of women being registered, especially young women.

### Limitations of NVRA Studies

Limitations of the research reviewed above include the timing of the research, the lack of assessment of NVRA provisions targeting the least registered, the lack of emphasis on outcomes on the individual, and incorrect assumptions about the actual extent of NVRA implementation in the states.

#### *Timing of Research*

Articles published before implementation of the NVRA used the fact that some states had previously instituted mail, motor voter, public assistance, or Election Day Registration programs to conduct comparative analyses of state data to predict the impact of the NVRA (such as Knack,

1995; Rhine, 1995; Highton, 1997). Since January 1995, when states were required to implement the NVRA, seven federal elections, four of them presidential, have occurred. Unfortunately, little has been published on the impact of the NVRA that examines registration and/or turnout in any election after 1996—a low-turnout election less than two years after the implementation of the Act. Indeed, about a dozen states did not implement the NVRA on time (by January 1, 1995).<sup>7</sup> The Brown and Wedeking (2006) study is the only academic article available that reviews multiple presidential elections post-NVRA.

#### *Lack of Assessment of All NVRA Provisions*

Most academic studies have focused on the motor voter provision of the NVRA to the exclusion of other provisions. Because over 80 percent of the adult population has a driver's license, this provision reaches the largest number of persons. However, the provision requiring voter registration applications be given to the millions of clients of public assistance agencies and disability agencies when they apply for benefits, recertify their eligibility for benefits, or inform the agency of a change of address was added because these agencies reach the people least likely to be reached by motor vehicle agencies, and because their clients are those least likely to be registered.

Programs covered under this provision include: the Food Stamp Program; the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC); Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF); Medicaid; and related or similar state programs. Unlike with the motor voter provisions, the NVRA does not require the simultaneous integration of voter registration into public assistance agencies' applications and recertification procedures. Thus, public assistance and disability agency registration is implemented differently from motor voter and is intended to reach a particular demographic that motor voter does not reach.

Additionally, the NVRA included the first federal requirement that covered states conduct regular maintenance

## A Review of Academic Literature on the Effectiveness of the National Voter Registration Act

of their lists, removing persons who have died, moved, or otherwise become ineligible. Many states purged their voter rolls only intermittently before the NVRA, while 71 million names have been removed since 1995. In 2005–06, states purged, on average, 33.8 percent as many names as they received applications to be registered. There is no published research on the impact of this purging, whether any significant numbers of eligible voters are being purged erroneously, or on how well or accurately states are complying with the list maintenance provisions of the Act, which include some protections for voters. While most provisions of the NVRA—those requiring mail registration or registration at particular agencies—should increase registration, the purging provisions should act to reduce registration. Research to date has looked only at the net effect.

### *Lack of Individual-Level Outcome Indicators*

Models employed by academic researchers to assess NVRA performance often use aggregate state-level registration or turnout as their dependent variables. These outcomes, however, may not fairly capture the impact of the public agency registration provisions of the NVRA because of the particular demographic targeted by these programs. For instance, while state-level indicators may show only a small impact from the NVRA overall, the aggregation may mask the larger positive impact of the NVRA on certain demographic subpopulations. Of course, one way around this would be to use individual registration status as the dependent variable. In the case of the CPS, using individual registration as the dependent variable also has the benefit of increasing the sample size from a few dozen states to tens of thousands of individuals.

### *Incorrect Assumptions about NVRA Implementation*

Academic research has not adequately accounted for variation in implementation of the NVRA. These studies generally either assumed full implementation of the NVRA or treated implementation as a simple dichotomous variable (i.e., states were simply designated as implementing or not

implementing the policies). Some studies incorporated implementation by specifying some variation in the kind of pre-NVRA voter registration programs states offered. For instance, Knack (1995) and Highton and Wolfinger (1998) designated state motor voter programs before NVRA enactment as either “passive” or “active.” Meanwhile, Martinez and Hill (1999) and Brown and Wedeking (2006) compared “low” versus “full” state motor voter programs. Parry and Shields (2001) did account for implementation delays, but not the degree or quality of the Act’s implementation in states that did not experience a delay.

However, these designations and categorizations should not be confused with indicators regarding the quality of a program’s implementation. In other words, even after noting the differences between voter registration policies in states or over time, questions about the quality or degree of implementation remain. It is clear from field investigations by Project Vote, the Department of Justice, and others that many states do not fully or correctly implement the NVRA, particularly the provisions covering agencies that serve citizens with low incomes and disabilities.<sup>8</sup>

In short, the lack of attention to implementation is a significant flaw in NVRA research. Questions about the degree of implementation of the Act are a form of process evaluation, which, if ignored while evaluating a program, can lead to incorrect inferences of policy effects. Put simply: one would not expect to find a program effective if the program was not fully delivered or was delivered only half-heartedly.

## **Conclusion and Considerations for Future Research**

The NVRA was the most significant change to national voter registration law since the Voting Rights Act, yet millions of Americans, disproportionately low-income, remain unregistered. Given the limitations of the research on the NVRA discussed in this essay, important opportunities still exist for researchers to learn more about the implementation of the NVRA and to evaluate its effectiveness in achieving the goals Congress established for it.

This is especially timely as advocacy groups and policy makers at both the state and federal levels are looking to further modernize voter registration processes. How much has the NVRA increased registration? Are all provisions fully and effectively implemented in every state, and would fuller implementation lead to higher registration? What can we learn from fourteen years of the NVRA that is relevant to current discussions about voter registration reform?

Future research on the NVRA should recognize the limitations of the prior research and should seek to improve upon it. Researchers should take advantage of the fact that data is available to assess the NVRA over a longer time period since its enactment, and also utilize individual-level indicators to better understand its specific impact on various populations. Field research showing that NVRA implementation is inconsistent, has fallen off, or in some places is nonexistent, should be taken into consideration to create appropriate indicators of NVRA compliance for use in research models. Future research should also work to assess the impact of all provisions of the NVRA, including public assistance agency registration and voter purging. A robust research agenda focusing on NVRA effectiveness is timely and necessary.



# Scholarly Research on the National Voter Registration Act

This annotated bibliography is divided into three sections: evaluations of the impact of NVRA provisions, predictions regarding the impact of reforms similar to those in the NVRA, and other articles on the Act.

## I. Evaluations of NVRA impact

*The articles and reports listed below attempt to assess the impact of provisions in the NVRA. As of 2009, seven federal elections, four of them presidential, have occurred since states were required to implement the NVRA in January 1995. Unfortunately, little has been published on the impact of the NVRA that examines registration and/or turnout in any election after 1996 – a low-turnout election less than two years after the implementation of the Act. Only Brown and Wedeking look at multiple post-NVRA presidential elections. Also, unfortunately, few of these papers acknowledge issues of implementation, and none pay close attention to implementation problems related to various provisions in the Act, such as the provision covering registration services in public assistance agencies.*

**Brown, R. D., & Wedeking, J. (2006).** People who have their tickets but do not use them: “Motor voter,” registration, and turnout revisited. *American Politics Research*, 34, 479–504.

In this study, Brown and Wedeking examine the NVRA’s direct impact on registration, and its indirect impact on turnout. They use three measures of registration and turnout constructed from the following sources: FEC and EAC (1980–2000), the Census Bureau using the vot-

ing-age population as denominator (1980–2004), and the Census Bureau using the voting-eligible population as denominator (1980–2004). They find that the NVRA had a positive impact on aggregate registration, with the largest registration gains under the NVRA in states with no motor voter provisions prior to the NVRA. However, they find little evidence of any positive impact of the NVRA on actual turnout. In addition, using measures of equality developed by Rosenstone and Hansen, Brown and Wedeking find that the NVRA did boost registration of underrepresented groups and increased equality of access to registration, but turnout of the registered declined. In their words, “Giving away free tickets to the game will not increase attendance if fans have little motivation to sit in the stands” (p. 499).

**Hill, D. (2003).** A two-step approach to assessing composition effects of the National Voter Registration Act. *Electoral Studies*, 22, 703–720.

Hill conceptualizes the impact of the NVRA on two levels: a direct impact on voter registration and an indirect impact on turnout. Hill assesses the impact of the NVRA on the education, income, age, and racial/ethnic makeup of state electorates on both of these levels. Hill uses the Rosenstone and Hansen EQ measure, which measures demographic disparities in a population, as the dependent variable in separate models for registration and voting. The state EQ scores were calculated for education, income, age, and race/ethnicity using data from the 1992, 1994, 1996, and 1998 CPS Voting and Registration Supplements.

Hill finds that by 1998 the NVRA had a positive effect in reducing the registration bias favoring those with higher education and those who are older. While Hill finds that the NVRA did subsequently reduce overrepresentation

## A Review of Academic Literature on the Effectiveness of the National Voter Registration Act

in the electorate based on education and age, the impact on voting was smaller than on registration. In 1996, the impact of the provision in the NVRA requiring states to accept mail-in voter registration applications reduced the bias toward those with higher incomes in registration and voting, but that effect was not sustained in 1998. In addition, Hill finds tentative evidence that the NVRA had a mild positive effect on reducing representational biases based on race/ethnicity in the registered and voting electorate in 1996 and 1998. Hill concludes by suggesting that the cost of voting is still high for some people regardless of the cost of registering.

**Parry, J. A., & Shields, T. G. (2001).** Sex, age, and the implementation of the motor voter act: The 1996 presidential election. *Social Science Quarterly*, 82, 506–523.

Parry and Shields examine the effects of barriers to voting on the registration and turnout of men and women of various age groups. Specifically, they look at closing dates and state delays in implementing the NVRA as barriers to voting, using the 1996 CPS Voting and Registration Supplement to model the effects. They find that barriers have a greater effect on women than men, with young women particularly impacted by a delay in NVRA implementation. Parry and Shields predict that decreasing barriers to voting may increase participation of women in elections, with the largest potential increase among younger women.

**Wolfinger, R. E., & Hoffman, J. (2001).** Registering and voting with motor voter. *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 34, 85–92.

Wolfinger and Hoffman use a logit analysis of data from the 1996 CPS Voting and Registration Supplement to compare registration of various demographic groups through DMV and other NVRA agencies. They find that, as intended, registration in public assistance agencies helps

to counter the class bias of DMV registration. However, turnout of those registered under the NVRA as a whole was lower than turnout of other registrants. Wolfinger and Hoffman estimate that those registered in DMVs are 5 percentage points less likely to vote than those registered previously, and those registered in public assistance agencies are 10 points less likely. (70 percent of those registered in DMVs voted in 1996, and 51 percent of those registered in public assistance agencies voted.) The authors note that this result is somewhat better than some pessimists had predicted.

**Knack, S. (2001).** Election-day registration: The second wave. *American Politics Research*, 29, 65–78.

Knack seeks to provide an upper-bound estimate of the NVRA's impact on turnout by analyzing Election-Day Registration (EDR) programs in states that implemented the program shortly before the 1994 election (Idaho, New Hampshire, Wyoming), thus becoming exempt from the NVRA. According to Knack, "Controlling for other factors, new EDR programs are associated with a turnout increase of about 6 percentage points in the midterm elections (1990–1994), and 3 percentage points in the presidential elections (1992–1996)." Knack concludes with the caveat that EDR states are states that already have high voter turnout before EDR, so the impact of the NVRA may be higher in states with historically low voter turnout.

**Knack, S. (1999).** Drivers wanted: Motor voter and the election of 1996. *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 32, 237–243.

The 1996 election was the first federal election after the implementation of the NVRA, but it was also an uncompetitive election, the reelection of an incumbent president. To determine whether the NVRA had a positive effect in the 1996 election, Knack compares changes in state turnout. Declines in turnout were significantly smaller in states that adopted NVRA provisions in 1995 than in states that



## A Review of Academic Literature on the Effectiveness of the National Voter Registration Act

already had NVRA-like programs in place in 1992. A similar comparison of these groups of states revealed that the NVRA also slowed the decline in turnout for under-represented groups, especially for the young and recent movers. Knack concludes that, even though aggregate turnout was low in 1996, the NVRA had a positive impact on turnout. Furthermore, in contrast to political predictions, Knack finds that the NVRA actually favored the Republicans in states that enacted NVRA programs for the first time after 1995.

**Martinez, M. D., & Hill, D. (1999). Did motor voter work? *American Politics Quarterly*, 27, 296–315.**

Martinez and Hill examine the impact of the DMV provision of the NVRA on turnout and inequality in the 1996 electorate. They provide the caveat that it is too early to assess the long-term impact of the NVRA, given that their study includes only one post-NVRA election. Turnout in 1996 was low overall, and Martinez and Hill find that the NVRA had no significant impact on state-level turnout. They assess turnout and inequality in the 1992 and 1996 elections in 24 states with no DMV programs and 13 states with low-level or passive DMV programs before 1996. They conclude, “Controlling for prior turnout, Senate electoral cycle, and competitiveness in the presidential election, states that moved from no prior implementation to compliance had turnout rates about 0.3 of a percentage point higher than states that experienced the least change in their registration program. States that moved from low implementation in 1992 to compliance in 1996 had turnout rates of nearly 2 percentage points lower than high implementation states, *ceteris paribus*.” Using exit polls, the authors find that the NVRA seemed to slightly exacerbate existing class and racial disparities in turnout. In their concluding discussion, they suggest that the easier registration procedures mandated by the NVRA must be accompanied by greater mobilization to affect turnout.

**Piven, F. F., & Cloward, R. A. (1996). Northern Bourbons: A preliminary report on the National Voter Registration Act. *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 29, 39–42.**

Piven and Cloward, social scientists who were prime movers behind the NVRA, discuss the political landscape surrounding the adoption and early implementation of the NVRA (through the 1996 election). They report that Republicans resisted the public assistance provision of the NVRA, and that following its passage Republican governors tried to impede implementation of public assistance agency registration (Section 7). They rank states based on the percentage of the public assistance recipient/applicant pool registered to vote during the first nine months of NVRA implementation—the first use of a state-level performance measure for public assistance agency registration under the NVRA. Piven and Cloward find that southern states with Democratic governors had the highest percentages of public assistance applicants registered to vote. Southern states where Democratic governors were replaced with Republicans in 1994 still outperformed the rest of the country, although the authors suggest that this could change as those governors take control.

## **II. Predictions of NVRA impact**

*The research below was published before implementation of the NVRA, and used the fact that some states had previously instituted motor voter, voter registration in public assistance agencies, mail-in voter registration applications, or Election Day registration to do comparative analyses of state data.*

**Knack, S., & White, J. (1998).** Did states' motor voter programs help the Democrats? *American Politics Quarterly*, 26, 344–365.

To predict the effect of the NVRA on party registration, Knack and White use state-level data from 26 states from 1976–1994 to look at the impact on party registration by NVRA-like programs (DMV, mail-in, and public agency registration). Knack and White find that state motor voter programs led to a significant increase in the proportion of registrants on the rolls who are not affiliated with a major party. They concluded that no significant change in party affiliation will follow enactment of the NVRA. Similarly, the mail-in registration provision of the NVRA will have no impact on party affiliation. However, they predicted that agency registration programs under the NVRA will significantly increase party affiliation with the Democratic Party.

**Highton, B., & Wolfinger, R. E. (1998).** Estimating the effects of the National Voter Registration Act of 1993. *Political Behavior*, 20(2), 79–104.

Highton and Wolfinger make a greater effort than some earlier studies to identify state motor voter programs that were similar to the NVRA in order to more accurately predict its impact; however, they find that most state programs differed significantly from the provisions of the NVRA. They analyze the program in Colorado, and also examine the impact of Election Day Registration. According to Highton and Wolfinger, “Our two approaches lead

to estimates of turnout increases due to the motor voter provision of 4.7 and 8.7 percentage points, respectively.” They predict the impact of motor voter to be greatest among people under age of 30 and those who moved within two years of election. Because no state had an NVRA-like program in public assistance agencies, they are unable to estimate its impact. Among their other findings: “Eliminating purging for not voting will increase turnout by as much as 2 percentage points. Universal mail registration will have no effect.”

**Franklin, D. P., & Grier, E. E. (1997).** Effects of motor voter legislation: Voter turnout, registration, and partisan advantage in the 1992 presidential election. *American Politics Quarterly*, 25, 104–117.

Franklin & Grier use state-level turnout, registration, and partisan voting data provided by the U.S. Department of Commerce to assess the impact on each by motor voter programs in the 1992 general election. “The 1992 presidential election featured nine states and the District of Columbia with effective motor voter laws on the books. In 1996 all states will be required to have similar motor voter procedures. We conduct a multivariate analysis to compare turnout differences, partisan behavior, and registration levels in motor voter and non-motor voter states. We find that rates of voter registration and turnout are significantly higher in motor voter states than in other states. In addition, it appears that these newly registered voters are just as likely to vote as other registered voters. We find no significant partisan advantage for either party in motor voter states” (Franklin and Grier, 1997, p. 104).

**Highton, B. (1997).** Easy registration and voter turnout. *The Journal of Politics*, 59, 565–575.

The goal of this study is to assess the impact of reduced barriers to voting on an individual's likelihood to vote. Highton uses data from the 1980 and 1992 CPS Voting and Registration Supplement to compare the likelihood

## A Review of Academic Literature on the Effectiveness of the National Voter Registration Act

an individual will turn out in four “easy registration states” (states that have Election Day Registration or no registration) with individual turnout in the rest of the country.) This analysis assesses the effect of easy registration on turnout and the socioeconomic skew of the voting population (measured by age, education, and family income. Highton relies on cross-tabulations and a multivariate logit model for his analysis. While the skew towards more educated voters lessened in easy registration states, Highton finds, barriers to registration did not appear to be the main cause of the socioeconomic skew of the voting electorate. Highton predicts that the NVRA would lessen the socioeconomic skew of American voters, and would have a modest yet positive impact on overall turnout. While people who are poor or less educated would benefit under the NVRA, they would not turn out at the higher rate of citizens of higher socioeconomic status.

**Rhine, S. L. (1996).** An analysis of the impact of registration factors on turnout in 1992. *Political Behavior*, 18(2), 171–185.

Using data from the 1992 National Election Study, Staci Rhine assesses the predicted impact of “motor voter,” mail-in registration, voter purging, and registration closing dates. As expected, turnout declined as the time between registration closing date and Election Day increased. Therefore, Rhine concludes that there is a strong positive relationship between same-day registration and turnout. Motor voter provisions in a state also showed a strong positive relationship with turnout. Rhine finds a negative relationship between mail-in registration and turnout, but adds the caveat that this result could be due to model misspecification. She finds a positive relationship between increased length of time that non-voting triggers a purge of a state’s voter registration rolls and turnout, but only for non-southern states. She predicts a 10–14 percent increase in turnout if same-day registration were enacted nationally, and a 1.3–6.7 percent increase in turnout as a result of the motor voter provision of the NVRA.

**Calvert, J. W. (1996).** Motor voter registration: Will it make a difference? *American Review of Politics*, 17, 365–378.

Calvert analyzes Michigan’s experience with motor voter registration in the 1990, 1992, and 1994 elections. Calvert’s simple correlation analysis of the unpublished data provided by motor vehicle bureaus leads him to predict that motor voter would result in “almost universal registration” of all citizens, but would have little impact on turnout. Calvert further argues that motor voter appeared to lead to a more representative registered population, but a less representative voting population in Michigan, and appeared to have no significant effect on partisan share of the vote.

**Knack, S. (1995).** Does “motor voter” work? Evidence from state-level data. *The Journal of Politics*, 57, 796–811.

“Using state-level registration and turnout data over the 1976–1992 period, this study finds that motor voter programs already implemented in many states have significantly increased participation rates” (Knack, 1995, p. 796). Knack employs pooled time-series cross-section models with state-level registration and turnout data from 1976 through 1992. DMV, mail-in, agency registration, and variations in purging are included in the analysis. DMV programs are qualified as “active” or “passive,” and a duration-based specification for DMV is used to account for a state’s varying renewal periods for driver’s licenses. Based on the success of state motor voter programs in increasing participation, Knack predicts that its implementation nationally would positively impact registration and voting. The study shows little evidence of the effectiveness of the other programs (mail-in, agency-based registrations, and limitations on the purging of voter rolls), but Knack suggests there may not be sufficient data to assess them.

## A Review of Academic Literature on the Effectiveness of the National Voter Registration Act

Rhine, S. L. (1995). Registration reform and turnout change in the American states. *American Politics Quarterly*, 23, 409–426.

Rhine assesses the impact on state-level turnout of various voter registration provisions in the states, such as state motor voter programs, registration closing date, how often states purge their voter rolls, and mail-in registration. Rhine uses a pooled time-series cross-sectional logit model to assess the effects of each provision, which includes elections from 1972 through 1992. “The registration closing date and motor–voter registration show a clear relationship to higher turnout, whereas mail registration and eased purge procedures do not. As a result, turnout gains because of the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 are likely, but they will be modest” (Rhine, 1995, p. 409).

Mitchell, G. E., & Wlezian, W. (1995). The impact of legal constraints on voter registration, turnout and the composition of the American electorate. *Political Behavior*, 17, 179–202.

Mitchell and Wlezian model the impact of state voter registration laws, such as closing dates, mail-in registration, and purging of the voter rolls, on three state-level indicators: registration, turnout, and composition of the electorate. To conduct their analysis, they used Census and National Election Studies data to separately model the impact of voter registration laws on each outcome in elections from 1972 to 1982. They conclude that liberalizing voter registration laws would increase voter registration rates and, to a lesser degree, turnout. However, they conclude that there would be little if any change to the composition of the voting electorate because factors other than the cost of registering and voting cause poor and less-educated people to not participate.

Crocker, R. (1990). *Voter registration and turnout in states with mail and motor voter registration systems*. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service.

Analyzing motor voter and mail registration in the states for the benefit of members of Congress considering the NVRA, Crocker finds that registration and turnout rates were somewhat higher in motor voter states than in non-motor voter states, but that mail registration was associated with reduced registration and turnout. To draw his conclusion, Crocker uses state-level data on voter registration and turnout for elections during the 1972–1988 period to create simple comparisons of registration rates and turnout in the states. Crocker compares these indicators in states that had and had not adopted motor voter or mail registration programs during this time period. He also makes within-state comparisons of these indicators before and after each state adopted motor voter and mail registration.



### **III. Other literature on the NVRA**

**Piven, F. F., Minnite, L. C., & Groarke, M. (2009).** *Keeping Down the Black Vote: Race and the Demobilization of American Voters.* New York: New Press.

In this book the authors examine how our political system, despite “Get out the Vote” rhetoric, works to suppress the vote—especially the votes of African-Americans. Taking issue with the common wisdom that parties compete by mobilizing voters, the authors engage in historical analysis to argue that our political system is as focused on stopping people from voting as on getting Americans to go to the polls. The book includes the story of how the NVRA became law, and how it has been implemented in the Clinton and Bush administrations.

**Highton, B. (2004).** Voter registration and turnout in the United States. *Perspectives on Politics*, 2, 507–515.

Highton discusses the cost-benefit theory of voter participation and reviews prior research on the relationship between voter registration laws and voter turnout in the United States. He concludes his review by arguing that registration reform has reached the limits of what it can accomplish in increasing turnout, and that other strategies are needed.

**Piven, F. F., & Cloward, R. A. (2000).** *Why Americans Still Don't Vote: And Why Politicians Want It That Way.* Boston: Beacon Press.

In this follow-up to their 1988 *Why Americans Don't Vote*, Piven and Cloward trace a history of non-participation in American elections, the interaction of voter mobilization and U.S. political parties, and the push for federal voter registration reform (NVRA), and offer an initial assess-

ment of the success of NVRA implementation. Looking at the data available by 1998, they note that registration had indeed increased, but that turnout had not. The authors argue that, in addition to easier registration, a new movement or an entrepreneurial politician to mobilize voters was needed to overcome the increasing alienation of American voters.

**Schriner, K., & Shields, T. G. (1998).** Empowerment of the political kind: The role of disability service organizations in encouraging people with disabilities to vote. *Journal of Rehabilitation*, 64, 33–37.

Schriner and Shields argue that Americans with disabilities may be a “sleeping giant” in American electoral politics. People with disabilities are underrepresented in the American voting electorate, with participation rates lower than non-disabled Americans. After reviewing current participation rates of, and voter registration policies affecting, Americans with disabilities, Schriner and Shields outline three important ways in which government and non-profit organizations that serve people with disabilities can effect greater electoral participation and greater political influence for people with disabilities. First, they argue, agencies should fully implement the National Voter Registration Act. Second, agencies that serve people with disabilities should provide transportation to the polls, when possible, and work with election officials to ensure that polling places are accessible to their clients. Finally, organizations should participate in non-partisan voter education activities prior to each election.

**Piven, F. F., & Cloward, R. A. (1988).** National voter registration reform: How it might be won. *PS: Political Science*, 21, 868–875.

Piven and Cloward argue that registration procedures in the U.S. obstruct voting, and also have the effect of “weed-

## A Review of Academic Literature on the Effectiveness of the National Voter Registration Act

ing out” voters some politicians consider to be “undeserving,” resulting in the much lower turnout rates in the United States than in other democracies. Since those who are registered to vote turn out at a high rate, they conclude, reforms should be put in place to ease voter registration. Using the success of the Voting Rights Act as an example, Piven and Cloward argue that to make voter registration legislation in Congress successful, registration rates of underrepresented groups must increase. They trace a brief history of the Human SERVE Campaign, which successfully advocated for various jurisdictions to allow voter registration in government agencies. Piven and Cloward anticipate that rising registration rates based on public agency registration programs already enacted would propel Congress to adopt national reform legislation.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The literature review is based in part on a paper by Douglas Hess and Jody Herman entitled “Evaluating the NVRA with State and County-Level Data and Indicators of Compliance: A Multi-level Regression Analysis,” which was presented at the American Political Science Association Annual Meeting in Boston, August 2008.
- <sup>2</sup> Committee on House Administration. (1993, February 2). House Report 103-9.
- <sup>3</sup> 42 U.S.C. 1973gg-3.
- <sup>4</sup> 42 U.S.C. 1973gg-5.
- <sup>5</sup> For a summary of the NVRA, see “A Summary of the National Voter Registration Act.” Project Vote. March 2006. Available at <http://www.projectvote.org/images/publications/NVRA/Summary%20of%20the%20NVRA.pdf>.
- <sup>6</sup> Findings in academic research of the NVRA’s positive impact confirm prior research that restrictive registration laws effectively prohibited registration for some (see Piven & Cloward, 1988; Mitchell & Wlezian, 1995).
- <sup>7</sup> California and Virginia sued the United States to avoid complying; Illinois, South Carolina, Michigan, and Pennsylvania also refused to implement, and all six were sued by the Justice Department. Mississippi, Idaho, Indiana, Kansas, Montana, Nevada, New Hampshire, and New Jersey were also identified as “resistant” by N. Lane Stone, “The National Voter Registration Act Implementation Status Report,” Washington DC: League of Women Voters Education Fund, 1994. Additional states were less than effective or timely in implementation. (Virginia was not labeled resistant, as it was granted extra time because of its constitutional process.)
- <sup>8</sup> For a review of Project Vote’s field research, see “NVRA Public Agency Registration (Section 7) Field Research Results.” Project Vote, March 1, 2008. Available at: [http://www.projectvote.org/images/publications/NVRA/NVRA\\_Field\\_Research\\_Results\\_Memo\\_5-1-08.pdf](http://www.projectvote.org/images/publications/NVRA/NVRA_Field_Research_Results_Memo_5-1-08.pdf). See also the U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, Voting Rights Section home page at <http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/voting/> to review some of the Section’s work on the NVRA.



## About the Authors

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## About Project Vote

Project Vote is a national nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that promotes voting in historically underrepresented communities. Project Vote takes a leadership role in nationwide voting rights and election administration issues, working through research, legal services, and advocacy to ensure that our constituencies are not prevented from registering and voting.

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