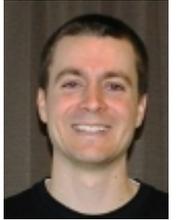


## Despite heavy rhetoric, partisan considerations had little influence on states' decisions to make voting easier.

*Recent efforts in a number of Republican-controlled states to roll back previous reforms that make the act of voting easier, combined with the adoption of voter identification laws, signal the strong partisan divisions on matters of election administration. By examining the factors that explain the initial adoption of two common convenience voting methods (no-excuse absentee voting and in-person early voting), [Daniel Biggers](#) and [Michael Hanmer](#) find that partisan considerations were much more limited than one might expect. Republican governors were less likely to adopt in-person early voting but not no-excuse absentee voting and control of or party strength in the state legislature exerted little influence on this decision. Instead, enactment of both reforms seems to have been affected by utility, with elderly and rural population size, as well as geographic size, influencing adoption. These findings contrast with the heightened partisan debate on these matters and provide important insights into the history and future of these reforms.*



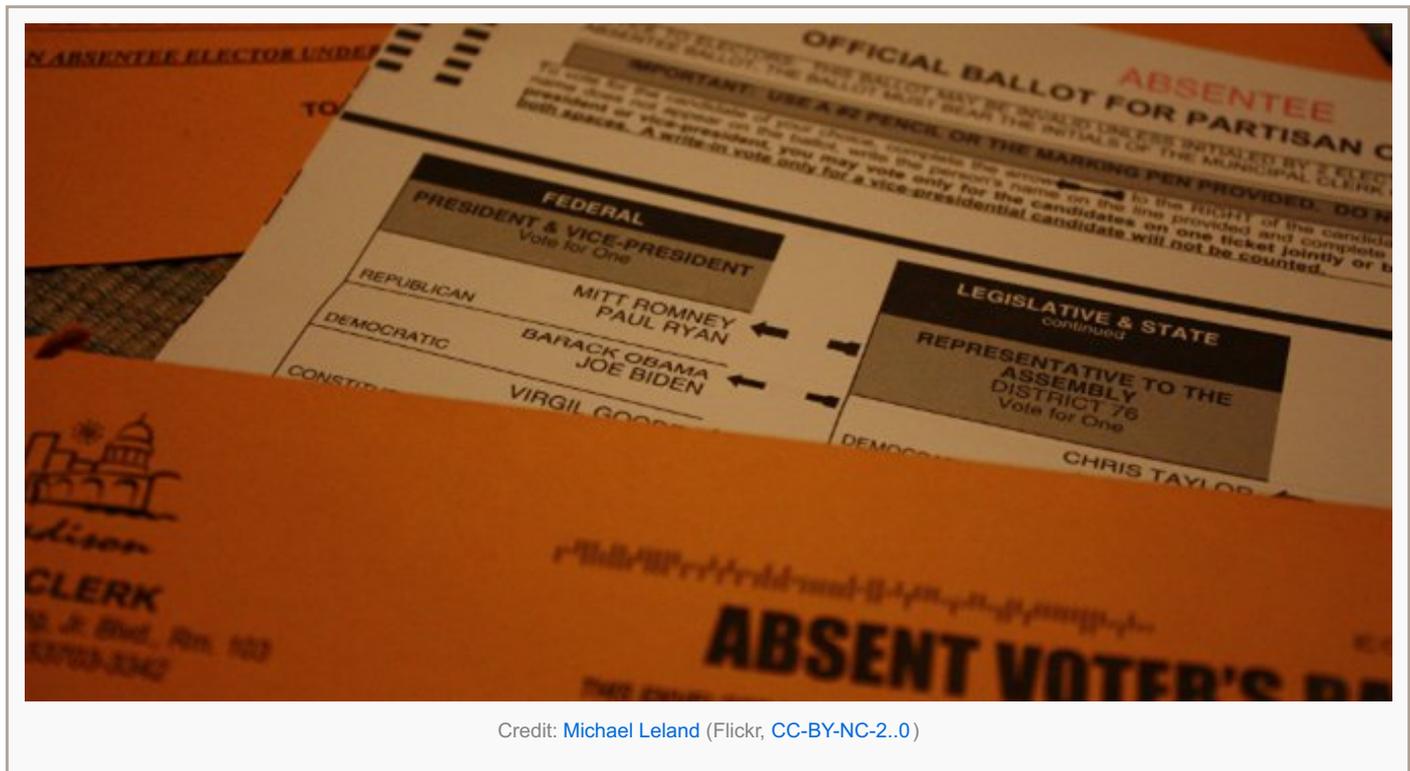
In September 2014, the U.S. Supreme Court blocked a judge's order to restore a week of early voting eliminated by Ohio's GOP-controlled General Assembly. Two years earlier, the Supreme Court rejected an appeal by Ohio's Secretary of State to overturn a federal court ruling that required the state to permit early voting the weekend before the election. In both instances, the struggle pitted Republican-led efforts to reduce the availability of early voting against Democratic opposition to changes in a voting method that its supporters, particularly African Americans, may disproportionately use. As such, regardless of the true motivations of those on both sides of the aisle, the disagreement was largely framed as a partisan fight aimed at gaining an electoral advantage by influencing who might turn out.

This divide is emblematic of the recent partisan spats across the country in recent elections involving convenience voting reforms, or policies designed to make voting easier. In addition to the adoption of voter identification laws in a number of states (which has garnered significant publicity), states have implemented (or sought to implement) other efforts to reduce the ease of voting, such as the elimination of same-day registration or the reduction of days on which registrants can vote early. Despite this strong polarization on the question of facilitating participation, however, we know little about the extent to which this partisan split actually influences the ease of voting across the country. This is a topic that we examine in recent research, which investigates the factors that motivate states' decisions to enact two common convenience voting methods: no-excuse absentee voting and in-person early voting. We find that despite the strong partisan split on these voting methods, the evidence around partisan effects is mixed.

All states permit absentee voting, which allows registrants who have difficulty making it to the polls (for reasons such as being out of town, old age, disability, or illness) to apply for a ballot that is either mailed to them or picked up from the elections office. While this application requires a permitted reason for the request, the no-excuse variant removes this requirement and allows any registrant to vote in this manner. In contrast, in-person early voting permits an individual to vote early at a designated location by simply showing up and without applying for a ballot beforehand. Thus, the convenience provided is distinct: No-excuse absentee voting allows registrants to vote wherever they want but puts the onus on them to apply for and return the ballot. Early voting requires a single step with no application, but the voter must potentially wait in line and show up at a specified location when it is open.

In order to determine why some states make it easier to vote, we created a unique dataset that identifies the adoption dates of no-excuse absentee voting and early voting procedures in each state with these policies. That information, culled from a historical analysis of state statutes, reveals a number of interesting patterns. First, the majority of states adopted these reforms before the recent era of heightened polarization; of the 29 states with no-excuse absentee voting and 32 with early voting, 19 and 18 states enacted these reforms before 2000,

respectively. Second, the two reforms exhibit different patterns of geographic dispersion; no-excuse absentee voting is found in all western states but few northeastern or southern states, while early voting has had much more success penetrating the South. Third, many states adopted both reforms at the same time (26 states permit both voting methods, 18 of which enacted the policies at the same time).



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Using this dataset, we show that despite the current strong partisan divisions on the merits of convenience voting there is mixed evidence of a partisan effect in the decision to enact these reforms. States with Republican governors are about 2.3 percentage points less likely to adopt in-person early voting procedures (on a baseline adoption probability of 3 points), signaling some apprehension among GOP officials in extending this voting method to citizens. For no-excuse absentee voting, however, we find no effect of who controls the executive or legislative branch of state government on the propensity to enact. As such, the recent polarization on these reforms is not reflected nearly to the same degree in the history of their enactment.

In contrast, for both manners of convenience voting enactment tended to occur in states where the voting method might have the greatest impact. States with large elderly populations, for example, are more likely to allow their residents to vote absentee without an excuse. Although old age is often a permissible excuse when absentee voting is restricted (due to concerns about the ability to easily get to and access the polls on Election Day), states with a higher percentage of residents over the age of sixty-five appear to simply decide to streamline the process. Similarly, geographically larger states, where potential voters are likely to encounter longer travel distances to the polls, are more prone to enact both convenience voting methods. Finally, states with larger percentages of rural residents, who often face the same difficulties accessing traditional polling states, are more inclined to establish in-person early voting. Thus, in many instances, we see convenience voting implemented not so much as an effort to gain an electoral edge, but rather as a form of constituent service. We find no evidence that larger minority populations reduce the propensity to enact these reforms or condition the influence of partisan considerations.

So, why does all the partisan bluster fail to exert itself more forcefully on enactment decisions? We suspect this derives at least in part from the fact that the extension of these voting methods occurred before they became politically charged, meaning that partisan considerations played a smaller role in adoption than they would today. It is also possible that no-excuse voting is somewhat of an aberration. Given the greater difficulty of leveraging this reform to mobilize likely supporters (the multi-stage process of requesting and returning a ballot means that parties cannot as easily track who has voted in comparison to in-person early voting), the parties may not view this reform as offering the same kind of electoral edge as, say voter identification laws, whose enactment, significant work (including our own) has found, is heavily influenced by partisan considerations. (We note that efforts to reduce early voting days have not also attempted to tighten restrictions on absentee voting) Moving forward, it remains an

open question as to how representative these results are of current dynamics at play in altering election administration across the states.

*This article is based on the paper “[Who Makes Voting Convenient? Explaining the Adoption of Early and No-Excuse Absentee Voting in the American States](#),” forthcoming in *State Politics & Policy Quarterly*.*

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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