



Iowa Research Online
The University of Iowa's Institutional Repository

Department of Political Science Publications

10-1-2005

Voter Turnout in Undergraduate Student Government Elections

Kimberly M. Lewis

Tom W. Rice

University of Iowa

Copyright © 2005 American Political Science Association. Used by permission. <http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayJournal?jid=PSC>

PS: Political Science & Politics, 38:4 (2005) pp. 723-729. DOI: 10.1017/S1049096505050201

Hosted by Iowa Research Online. For more information please contact: lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

Voter Turnout in Undergraduate Student Government Elections

Kimberly M. Lewis, *University of Iowa*
Tom W. Rice, *University of Iowa*

The research on voter turnout in America is impressive in quantity and quality, but it lacks breadth. National and state elections have received most of the attention, while the myriad of other elections, from municipal contests to policy referenda, have often been ignored. As a result, we know a great deal about turnout in state and national elections, and much less about turnout in other races. The temptation is to generalize the state and national conclusions to other elections, but this is risky. For example, in a recent aggregate-level study of small town elections in Iowa, Rice and Schlueter (2004) report a relationship that runs contrary to virtually all of the state and national literature: education and turnout are negatively correlated; that is, the citizens in better-educated communities vote in local elections at lower rates than the citizens in less-educated communities. This finding exposes the limitations in our understanding of voter turnout. If all we want is to speak with assurance about turnout in state and national elections, then the current literature is very helpful. If, however, we want to be able to speak more generally about turnout (and speak more specifically about turnout in elections other than state and national contests), then we need to study more types of elections.

There is certainly no shortage of elections to examine. Americans are asked to vote more often and for a much wider range of political offices than the citizens of any other nation. In a four-year span, the typical American faces at least a dozen "election days." Additionally, many people are asked to vote in a variety of private elections, such as contests to select leaders and set policy at work, churches, service clubs, and so on. Obviously, compiling a full account of voter turnout in America is a daunting task,

Tom Rice is professor in the department of political science at the University of Iowa. His research interests include voting behavior, social capital, and local government.

Kimberly Lewis is a law student at the University of Iowa. She received her B.S. in political science from the University of Iowa.

and well beyond the scope of this study. The purpose of our research is simply to move us in that direction. To that end, we provide the first systematic analysis of voter turnout in undergraduate student government elections at America's colleges and universities.

At first blush, studying turnout in student government elections may seem trite. After all, student governments exercise very little control over the affairs of their schools. There are, however, several good reasons for studying student elections. For one, the regulations that govern these elections vary substantially from school to school, providing us the opportunity to examine how these differences influence turnout. The lessons learned from student elections should help us understand how turnout in other elections would be affected by changes in regulations. As an example, the experiments with online voting that some schools are conducting should provide clues about how online voting would influence turnout in more traditional elections. A related reason for examining student elections is that they may give us ideas for how to increase turnout, especially among young people. Perhaps schools with high turnout rates have electoral environments that could be replicated in other settings with similar results. Another reason for looking at campus elections is that this research may help increase student interest in elections. By making the study of turnout more proximate to their daily lives, students may become more curious about elections specifically and the political process more generally. The last reason for studying student elections takes us back to our original point: a comprehensive understanding of turnout requires that scholars examine a wider array of elections than they have to date. Studying undergraduate student government elections, which are held annually at hundreds of colleges and universities across the nation, will help build this comprehensive understanding.

Research Design

We focus on American colleges and universities that offer four-year degrees.

These include four-year degree schools that also offer two-year degrees and four-year schools that also offer graduate degrees. According to a list compiled by *US News and World Report* (2004), approximately 1,400 schools meet our criterion. From this list, we drew a random sample stratified by undergraduate enrollment. There are far more small schools than large schools, so if we selected randomly our sample would be skewed in favor of small schools. We divided the schools into four enrollment categories: 0–2,000; 2,001–5,000; 5,001–10,000; and greater than 10,000 students. One hundred schools were randomly chosen from each of the categories and these schools served as our sample.

We used email to send a survey to the student government at each of the schools. For most schools, we were able to find either a general email address for the student government or a specific email address for the student government president. In many instances, however, we were forced to use a school's general email address. When this was the case, we prefaced our request for information by asking the recipient of the email to forward it to the student government. About one-quarter of the schools were emailed in November of 2003 and the other three-quarters were emailed in February and March of 2004. Schools that did not respond to our first email received a second email, and those that did not respond to the second email, received a third. Even with these multiple requests, our response rate was only 23.5%; 94 schools returned usable information. Of these schools, 21 have enrollments between 0 and 2,000, 19 have enrollments between 2,001 and 5,000, 28 have enrollments between 5,001 and 10,000, and 26 have enrollments larger than 10,000 students. The major reason for the low response rate probably lies in the part-time nature of student government. Most student government offices are staffed by an ever-changing cadre of student volunteers. Many requests for information—especially nonessential off-campus requests like ours—are probably misplaced or disregarded. With such a low response rate, it is important to confirm that our 94 schools are similar in

Table 1
Comparison of Student Demographics

Student Demographics	Student Enrollment							
	Less than 2000		2,001 to 5,000		5,001 to 10,000		More than 10,000	
	Returned Survey	Did Not Return Survey	Returned Survey	Did Not Return Survey	Returned Survey	Did Not Return Survey	Returned Survey	Did Not Return Survey
Percentage Women	60.7%	61.3%	57.6%	59.8%	55.5%	56.9%	53.0%	54.1%
Percentage Minorities	19.3	21.8	16.8	25.2	20.0	28.6	23.4	28.1
Percentage Full-Time	85.1	87.1	88.5	84.4	81.8	77.6	80.3	81.7
Percentage On Campus	60.6	60.1	59.7	59.7	36.3	33.9	24.9	24.7
Percentage Out-of-State	35.7	30.9	29.3	36.3	30.1	20.3	14.9	13.9

Percentage Women = the mean percentage of undergraduates who are women; Percentage Minorities = the mean percentage of undergraduates who are minorities; Percentage Full-Time = the mean percentage of undergraduates who are full-time students; Percentage On Campus = the mean percentage of undergraduates who live on campus; Percentage Out-of-State = the mean percentage of undergraduates who are from out-of-state. The summary percentages were calculated by averaging the school data in each category. For example, the first figure, 60.7%, was calculated by averaging the percentage of women at the schools that returned surveys and had enrollments of 2,000 or less.

characteristics to those schools that did not reply. In Table 1, the undergraduate student demographics for our schools are compared to the demographics of the other schools, and the results show that the demographics are very similar in every instance. Thus, we can be confident that the schools for which we received survey data are representative of all of the schools.

The email we sent to each school included a survey that asked many questions about the school's student government elections. Central among these was a query about how many students voted in the school's last student government presidential election. In addition, we asked how many candidates ran for president and the vote totals for the top three candidates. The other questions we asked included: 1) whether part-time students and graduate students were eligible to vote; 2) whether students could vote online; 3) how many days the polls were open; and 4) what types of campaign materials and activities were used during school elections (e.g., posters, web pages, and debates). The full text of the survey is in the Appendix. Along with the information from the surveys, we collected an assortment of potentially relevant aggregate data on each of the schools.

Analysis

We begin our analysis with an examination of the voter turnout rates at the schools. Next, we focus on accounting for the variations in turnout rates across the campuses. Several of the factors that may influence turnout are quantified in

order to serve as independent variables. Multiple regression analysis is used to determine the relationship between these independent variables and turnout.

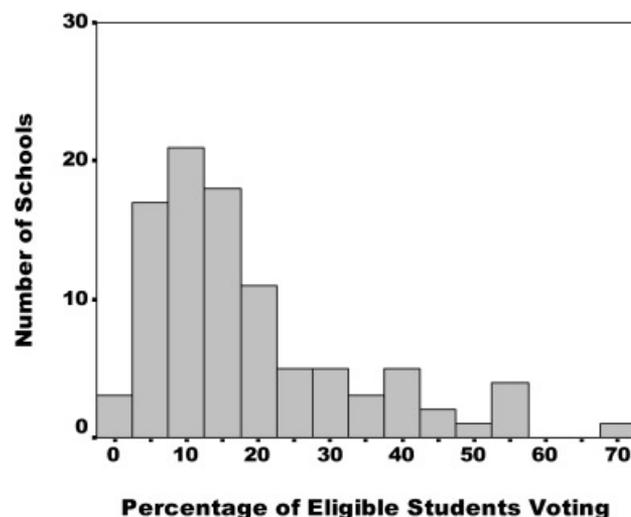
Student Government Election Turnout Rates

Each school's student government election turnout rate was derived by dividing the total number of students voting in the undergraduate student government presidential race by the total number of eligible students. The total number of students voting came directly from information provided by the schools in survey. Determining the total number of eligible students was a two-step process. From information provided in the survey, four voter eligibility categories were developed: 1) only full-time undergraduate students (9 schools); 2) full-time and part-time undergraduate students (33 schools); 3) full-time undergraduate and graduate students (8 schools); and 4) full-time and part-time undergraduate and graduate students (44 schools). We then consulted Peterson's *Four-Year Colleges* (2004) and other sources to determine how many students were in the eligibility category of each school. With this information,

we were able to compute the voter turnout for each school. The results are displayed in Figure 1. The skewed distribution shows that most of the schools had turnout rates of less than 25%, although a few had substantially higher rates. Overall, turnout ranged from less than 1% to almost 70%, with a mean of 18.8% and a standard deviation of 14.7.

How do these student government turnout rates compare to the rates in other American elections? The turnout rates in recent United States presidential races have averaged a little over 50% and the rates in recent mid-term congressional elections have averaged near 40%,

Figure 1
Distribution of Turnout in Student Government Presidential Elections



so the student rates are considerably lower. Compared to other races, however, the student rates do not look so low. Turnout rates in urban mayoral races have averaged between 30% and 35% in recent decades (Morlan 1984; Wood 2002), and the turnout rates in small towns have been even lower (Rice and Schlueter 2004). Primary election turnout rates vary sharply, but in many statewide primaries the percentage of eligible people voting is below 25% (Wright 1989). In the recent 2004 presidential primaries, turnout rates were often below 20% (McDonald 2004). In all, then, student turnout rates tend to be substantially lower than the rates in national and statewide general elections, but the student rates are similar to the rates in many other types of elections. We now examine the differences in student government turnout rates across campuses.

Independent Variables

Studies of turnout have long distinguished between the background contextual variables that influence voting, such as education levels and election rules, and election specific variables that influence voting, such as the closeness of the race and campaign mobilization efforts (Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes 1960; Patterson and Caldeira 1983; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). Turnout in student elections should also be influenced by both long-term contextual and short-term election variables.

Contextual Variables

We divided the contextual variables that may influence student election turnout into three types: institutional characteristics, student demographics, and election rules. The institutional characteristics are variables that have to do with the school as an institution, such as whether it is public or private and whether it is in a rural or urban setting. The student demographics are variables that describe the student body, such as the gender mix and the students' residential preferences. Some variables, such as admission rates, straddle the line between institutional characteristics and student demographics, and we have placed these variables in the category that seemed most appropriate. The elections rules are variables that have to do with the schools' policies regarding student government presidential elections, such as who is eligible to vote.

Seven institutional characteristics were operationalized for empirical testing and the information necessary to construct these variables came from Peterson's

Four-Year Colleges (2004). Public schools were coded as a "0" and private schools were coded as a "1". Schools in the South were coded as a "0" and all other schools were coded as a "1" (the South was considered the 11 states of the old Confederacy). Schools in a rural setting were coded as a "0", those in a small town setting were coded as a "1", and those in an urban or suburban setting were coded as a "2". The size of the school electorate was coded as the log transformation (base 10) of the number of students eligible to vote in undergraduate student government presidential elections. The log transformation was needed because even though we stratified our sample by school size, the number of eligible students was still skewed in favor of small schools. By logging eligibility, we reduce the skewness statistic from 1.69 to $-.27$. The difficulty of getting admitted to the schools was measured using Peterson's (2004) five-point scale, where the noncompetitive schools were coded as a "1", the minimally difficult schools were coded as a "2", the moderately difficult schools were coded as a "3", the very difficult schools were coded as a "4", and the most difficult schools were coded as a "5". Entrance difficulty was also measured using the percentage of applicants who were granted admission. Lastly, for a measure of the contact between the faculty and students, we used the number of students per faculty member.

We also used information from Peterson's *Four-Year Colleges* (2004) to construct the five student demographic variables used in Table 1. These variables are the percentage of students who are women, the percentage of students who are minorities, the percentage of students who are enrolled full-time, the percentage of students who live in campus housing, and the percentage of out-of-state students. Lastly, we used information from *US News and World Report* (2004) and other sources to create a dummy variable to indicate the presence of a Greek system. Schools with no social fraternities or sororities were coded as a "0" and schools with social fraternities or sororities were coded as a "1".

From information in the surveys we constructed seven independent variables that measure differences in the rules that govern student elections (three of these variables test eligibility differences). Schools that hold their student government presidential election at a different time than their other student government elections were coded as a "0" and those schools that hold their presidential election in conjunction with other student

elections were coded as a "1". Schools that elect their president and vice president separately were coded as a "0" and schools that elected their president and vice president as a ticket were coded as a "1". Schools that do not use online voting were coded as a "0" and schools using online voting were coded as a "1". Schools where the polls are open for only one day are coded as a "1", schools where the polls are open for two days are coded as a "2", and schools where the polls are open for more than two days are coded as a "3". As described earlier, we devised four categories to measure who is eligible to vote: 1) only full-time undergraduate students; 2) full-time and part-time undergraduate students; 3) full-time undergraduate and graduate students; and 4) full-time and part-time undergraduate and graduate students. To operationalize the categories, we created four dichotomous variables, one for each eligibility category. Each variable was coded as a "0" for schools that are not in that particular eligibility category and as a "1" for schools that are in that category. For example, the variable signifying the schools where only full-time undergraduate students can vote was coded as a "0" for all of the schools in the other eligibility categories and as a "1" for all of the schools where only full-time undergraduate students can vote. The omitted variable that serves as the baseline for our test of the effect of eligibility is the full-time and part-time undergraduate and graduate category.

Before turning to the election specific variables, it is important to note that many of the contextual variables probably serve, in part, as proxy measures for the socio-economic status of the students' parents. When we entered all of the independent variables, including the election specific variables, in a principal component analysis (varimax with Kaiser normalization) the first factor had seven variables with coefficients greater than .50 (or less than $-.50$). These variables, all contextual variables, are whether a school is public or private, the Peterson's difficulty index, the admission rate, the number of students per faculty member, the percentage of full-time students, the percentage of students living on campus, and the percentage of out-of-state students. We suspect that the reason these variables load heavily on the same factor is that they are tapping the socio-economic status of the students' families. Parents who are relatively well-to-do and well-educated should be, on average, more likely than other parents to prepare and encourage their children to attend private schools, schools with tough admission standards, out-of-state schools,

schools where most students live on campus, schools where most students are full-time, and schools with low student-teacher ratios. These same parents are likely to be active politically and to have children who are active politically (Jennings and Niemi 1981).

This is not to say that the contextual variables are only serving as surrogates for the socio-economic backgrounds of the students. It seems reasonable to assume, for instance, that living on campus will lead students to take more interest in student government. On-campus students should be more integrated into campus activities than off-campus students, and they are more directly affected by many of the issues that student governments address, such as dormitory regulations and campus cafeteria matters. Likewise, it seems reasonable to assume that full-time students will be more integrated into campus life than part-time students. As another example, private schools often take more time than public schools to assimilate students to campus, and this may foster more interest in student government. And, out-of-state students, freed from the distractions of family and hometown friends, may be more engaged in campus activities than in-state students. It is even possible that interest in campus life is enhanced in schools with low student-teacher ratios. The point is that these contextual variables may have an influence on student government election turnout beyond simply serving as surrogate indicators for the socio-economic status of the students' families.

Ideally, we would have a more direct school-level measure of the socio-economic status of the students' parents than the contextual variables. Such a measure would help us sort out to what degree the contextual variables are capturing the influences of socio-economic status and to what degree they are capturing the influences of variables they are directly measuring. Unfortunately, an extensive search did not uncover any useful measures of the socio-economic status of the parents. Many schools are reluctant to report these data and no organization makes a concerted effort to compile a comprehensive summary of the data. Every year, the Higher Education Research Institute interviews thousands of first-year college students at approximately 700 schools and collects information on parental socio-economic status, but the Institute does not make these data available by school. Even if the data were available, many of our schools would undoubtedly not be in the Institute's sample of schools. The United States Department of Education compiles the percentage of students at each school

who receive federal aid. These data might seem to be a promising proxy for parents' socio-economic status, but the data suffer from a number of serious shortcomings. First, the data are not collected for all schools. Second, the extent to which students apply for federal aid is in part a function of how much state aid is available, and the amount of state aid varies significantly across states. Third, the extent to which students apply for federal aid also depends on how aggressive schools encourage students to apply. We also considered using mean SAT and ACT scores by school as a very rough proxy for parents' socio-economic status, but many schools do not report these data.

Election Specific Variables

We divided the election specific forces that may influence turnout in student elections into two types: electoral competition and campaign activity. The information to construct these variables came from the surveys. Two variables measure electoral competition: the number of presidential candidates in the race and the percentage of the vote received by the winning presidential candidate. Campaign activity was also measured with two variables. One was created from the series of survey questions that asked respondents about whether or not each of the following five forms of campaign activity was used regularly in campus elections: posters, flyers, t-shirts, advertisements in student newspapers, and web pages. We formed a composite index of advertising activity by assigning to each school the number of advertising techniques used in its presidential elections, with scores ranging from 0 (none of the five advertising techniques were used) to 5 (all five techniques were used). In addition to this index, a second campaign activity variable was created to indicate whether organized debates are held between the presidential candidates. Schools that do not hold debates were coded as a "0" and schools that do hold debates were coded as a "1". These two variables provide a good gauge of the amount of campaign activity on the campuses, and they also serve as surrogate indicators of campaign mobilization efforts. Recent research shows that turnout increases when citizens are contacted directly by campaigns via canvassing, direct mail, and so on (Gerber and Green 2000), and when they are exposed to campaign advertising, even negative advertising (Freedman and Goldstein 1999). In our campus elections, it stands to reason that more students are exposed to campaigns—both directly and through advertising—when more types of cam-

campaign activity are used. Thus, more students should be mobilized to vote when campaign activity takes many forms, everything else being equal.

Determinants of Turnout

For a first look at the determinants of student turnout, we regressed turnout rates on all of the independent variables simultaneously using ordinary least squares regression. A check of the model diagnostics revealed that one independent variable, the percentage of students who live on campus, had a variance inflation factor score well above 5.00, indicating that it was highly collinear with other independent variables. When we dropped this variable and reran the equation we got the results presented in Model 1 of Table 2. The R-square value of .64 indicates that the model performs well overall, but only six of the independent variables are statistically significant. To try to improve on this, we reran the equation several times, each time dropping the least significant variable, until only statistically significant variables remained. The results of the final equation are reported in Model 2, in Table 1. The R-square remains strong and nine of the independent variables now reach statistical significance.

Five of the nine significant independent variables are institutional characteristics from the contextual category. The coefficients of four of these variables are in the direction we anticipated and show that student turnout tends to be higher at private schools, smaller schools, schools that are more difficult to get into, and schools that admit a higher percentage of their applicants. The one institutional variable that fails to perform as we expected is number of students per faculty member. The positive coefficient implies that schools with more students per faculty member tend to have higher turnout. We do not have a good substantive explanation for this relationship, but it is worth noting that it emerges only after controlling for the other independent variables. The bivariate correlation between the number of students per faculty member and turnout is negative, as expected.

The only student demographic variable to reach significance is the percentage of full-time students. The positive coefficient for this variable indicates that turnout tends to be higher at schools with more full-time students. Two of the election rules variables are significant. The negative coefficient for the variable designating whether the presidential election is held in conjunction with other student government elections suggests that presidential election turnout tends to be

Table 2
Student Government Election Turnout Regression Models

Independent Variables	Model 1		Model 2	
	β	Beta	β	Beta
Constant	61.65		33.67	
<i>Contextual Variables</i>				
<i>Institutional Characteristics</i>				
Public/Private	7.59*	(.26)	7.85**	(.27)
Region	.11	(.03)	—	—
Rural/Urban	-.60	(-.02)	—	—
Total Eligible Voters Logged	-19.87**	(-.62)	-16.98**	(-.53)
Peterson's Difficulty Index	4.33*	(.23)	3.49*	(.19)
Admission Rate	-.14*	(-.18)	-.12*	(-.16)
Students per Faculty Member	.72	(.19)	.80*	(.20)
<i>Student Demographics</i>				
Percentage Women	-.11	(-.07)	—	—
Percentage Minorities	.01	(.09)	—	—
Percentage Full-Time	.20*	(.19)	.21**	(.19)
Percentage Out-of-State	-.01	(-.09)	—	—
<i>Greek System</i>				
<i>Election Rules</i>				
Held with Other Elections	-4.48	(-.13)	-4.56*	(-.13)
Pres/VP Run as a Ticket	2.14	(.07)	—	—
Online Voting	4.38	(.15)	4.52*	(.15)
How Long Polls Open	.00	(.00)	—	—
FT UG Eligible	-1.68	(-.34)	—	—
FT and PT UG Eligible	-.85	(-.03)	—	—
FT UG and G Eligible	2.19	(.04)	—	—
<i>Election Specific Variables</i>				
<i>Electoral Competition</i>				
Number of Candidates	-2.25	(-.17)	—	—
Winner's Vote Percentage	-.14	(-.21)	—	—
<i>Campaign Activity</i>				
Cumulative Advertising	2.12*	(.18)	2.00*	(.17)
Debates	-.75	(-.02)	—	—
R-squared	.64		.61	

Where: β = unstandardized multiple regression coefficients; Beta = standardized regression coefficients; ** is significance at the .01 level; * is significance at the .05 level; — means the variable was not included in the model; FT means full-time; PT means part-time; UG means undergraduate; and G means graduate. See the text for information on how the independent variables are coded. The schools where full-time and part-time undergraduates and graduates were eligible to vote served as the omitted category for the eligibility variables. The sample size is 94.

higher when the election is held at a different time than other student government races. Online voting appears to increase turnout, as indicated by the positive coefficient for this variable. The final significant variable, and the only election specific variable to reach significance, is the campaign advertising index. The positive coefficient means that turnout tends to be higher on campuses where student campaigns use many forms of advertising.

Discussion

The major conclusion from our research is that contextual variables influence turnout in student government

presidential elections far more than election specific variables. For colleges and universities looking to increase turnout, this is not particularly good news.

Schools may want to increase interest in student elections for many reasons, from the bonds it may help forge between the students and the school, to the positive and lasting effects it may have on the students' sense of political efficacy, but the primary message from Model 2 is that this will be a difficult task. The significant contextual variables measuring whether a school is public or private, academic competitiveness, admission rates, and the percentage of full-time students, are probably in part proxies for the socio-economic status of students'

parents, suggesting that one way to increase turnout would be to attract more students from well-to-do and well-educated families. This, of course, is not easy because the pool of such students is fixed. Many of the contextual variables probably also have an influence on turnout apart from serving as proxies for parents' socio-economic status, and the news is not especially good here, either. According to the coefficients for six of these variables, turnout would increase if public schools went private, the number of students eligible to vote was decreased, the difficulty of getting in was increased, fewer students were admitted, the number of student per faculty member was increased, and the percentage of full-time students was increased. All of these recommendations are either difficult or impractical, or both.

Not all of the news is bad, however. Model 2 suggests that many schools looking to increase turnout in student government elections would benefit from changing two basic election rules and by encouraging more campaign advertising. Based on the information in the model, schools that now hold their student presidential elections at the same time as other student elections would increase turnout more than 4% on average if they held their presidential elections separately. Likewise, schools that do not have online voting would increase their turnout over 4% on average if they adopted this means of voting. And, schools that encourage more campaign advertising—and a wider array of advertising—would probably also see a modest increase in turnout. Advertising can probably be increased if schools can generate more interest in student government, and thereby, student elections. Although it is beyond of the scope of our study to examine ways of increasing interest in student government, we will suggest that schools should think broadly, looking at everything from giving students incentives for participating in student government (perhaps service learning credit) to giving student governments more formal powers over campus decisions.

Our research is also relevant to a couple of contemporary debates about how to increase turnout in America's public elections. In recent years, many political observers and public officials have advocated allowing voters to cast their ballots over the Internet as a way of increasing voter turnout. Arizona experimented with online voting in its 2000 Democratic primary and Michigan used online voting in its 2004 Democratic primary, and in both instances heavy online voting contributed to higher than usual turnout (Gibson 2001; Seelye 2004). But, in a

much-hyped online Republican presidential straw-poll in Alaska in 2000, only 35 out of 3,500 eligible citizens voted (Gibson 2001). The results of our study are more in line with the Arizona and Michigan experiences: we find solid evidence that the option to vote online increases turnout in student government elections.

Another tactic implemented in recent decades to try to increase turnout in public elections has been to lengthen the time that the polls are open. In the beginning, this took the form of extending the hours that the polls were open on Election Day, but it has now been expanded to include "early voting" weeks before Election Day. Our research examines an approach between these two. Some schools limit voting to one day, others keep the polls open for two days, and some allow voting to continue for even longer, although rarely for more than a week. The existing research suggests that keeping polls open longer on Election Day helped increase turnout (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980), but that allowing people to vote weeks before Election Day has had little effect on turnout (Neeley and Richardson 2001; Richardson and Neeley 1996; Stein and Garcia-Monet 1997). The student government election data are consistent with the latter conclusion: we find that keeping the polls open for more than a day has no effect on turnout.

If we compare our findings more broadly to the literature on voter turnout in public elections, what do we see? There are some similarities. Most previous studies have found that contextual variables have a larger influence on turnout than election specific variables, and we find the same. Among the many contextual variables, socio-economic status has often been found to be among the most important (Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes 1960; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). We do not have any direct measures of the socio-economic background of the students, but if we assume that many of our contextual variables, such as whether a school is public or private, are related to their socio-economic upbringing, then our findings are consistent with the literature. Well-to-do and well-educated parents are probably more likely to send their children to private schools, schools that are difficult to get into, schools with low student-teacher ratios, and so on, and turnout tends to be higher at these types of schools. Also consistent with the literature is our finding that campaign advertising can have a positive impact on mobilizing turnout.

Not all of our research findings, however, buttress the existing literature. Con-

trary to much of the previous work (Cox and Munger 1989; Gray 1976), we find that close campaigns are not associated with higher voter turnout. Perhaps this is because students do not have the benefit of preelection polls to gauge the closeness of upcoming contests. We also find no support for the notion that turnout will be higher if more elections are held on the same day. Indeed, we find just the opposite: turnout tends to be lower in student government presidential elections if the contests are held in tandem with other student elections. Here again, our student government elections provide an interesting and constructive extension to the existing work on public elections.

To conclude, let us step away from discussing the determinants of turnout and revisit the absolute level of turnout in student elections. With an average turnout rate of approximately 20%, the stu-

dent rates are far below the turnout rates in national and statewide general elections. It is easy to assume that this does not bode well for the voting rate of today's young people as they age. We take a different view, however. While it is true that the student rates pale in comparison to the rates in most major public elections, the student rates are very similar to the rates in many municipal elections and many statewide primary elections. Given that students are only temporary residents of their campuses and that student governments do not have extensive powers, we find it encouraging that so many students vote. And, if we can find ways to increase voting in campus elections, such as implementing online voting, we may discover that turnout rates among young people in public elections begin to rise, too.

Appendix

Questionnaire

1. What was the month and year of your last student government presidential election?
2. Were there other student government elections taking place at the same time, such as student Senate elections?
3. Please tell me the number of votes each candidate received. You can refer to the candidates by number if you wish (candidate 1, candidate 2, etc.). This is one of the most important questions for our research, so please try to be precise.
4. Does your school have graduate students?
If yes, are they allowed to vote in undergraduate student elections?
5. Are part-time students allowed to vote in student elections?
6. Student governments are elected in many different ways. Which way below best describes your school?
 - a. President, Vice President, and other officers are elected separately.
 - b. President and Vice President are elected as a ticket, and the other officers are elected separately.
 - c. President, Vice President, and other officers all run as a ticket.
 - d. Other. Please explain.
7. From the list below, please check all of the forms of advertising and campaigning that are common in student elections on your campus.
 - a. Posters/signs
 - b. T-shirts
 - c. Web pages
 - d. Advertisements in student newspapers
 - e. Debates between candidates
 - f. Flyers
 - g. Other. Please specify.
8. Are students able to vote by computer (online) in student elections?
9. On some campuses, voting in student elections takes place on a single day. On other campuses students can vote anytime over a series of days. Which situation below best describes the voting in your student elections?
 - a. Voting takes place on a single day.
 - b. Voting takes place over two days.
 - c. Voting takes place over more than two days.

Note

*For a copy of the data, contact Professor Tom W. Rice, department of political science, University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA 52241 (tom-rice@uiowa.edu).

References

- Campbell, Angus, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller, and Donald Stokes. 1960. *The American Voter*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- Cox, Gary W., and Michael C. Munger. 1989. "Closeness, Expenditures, and Turnout in the 1982 U.S. House Elections." *American Political Science Review* 83: 217–231.
- Freedman, Paul, and Kevin Goldstein. 1999. "Measuring Media Exposure and the Effects of Negative Campaign Ads." *American Journal of Political Science* 43: 1189–1208.
- Four-Year Colleges*. 2004. Lawrenceville, NJ: Thomson Peterson's.
- Gerber, Alan S., and Donald P. Green. 2000. "The Effects of Canvassing, Telephone Calls, and Direct Mail on Voter Turnout: A Field Experiment." *American Political Science Review* 94: 653–663.
- Gibson, Rachel. 2001. "Elections Online: Assessing Internet Voting in Light of the Arizona Democratic Primary." *Political Science Quarterly* 116: 561–584.
- Gray, Virginia. 1976. "A Note on Competition and Turnout in the American States." *Journal of Politics* 20: 235–256.
- Jennings, M. Kent, and Richard G. Niemi. 1981. *Generations and Politics: A Panel Study of Young Adults and Their Parents*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- McDonald, Michael. 2004. elections.gmu.edu/Voter_Turnout_2004_Primary.htm. Accessed May 20.
- Morlan, Robert L. 1984. "Municipal vs. National Election Voter Turnout: Europe and the United States." *Political Science Quarterly* 99: 457–470.
- Neeley, Grant W., and Lilliard E. Richardson, Jr. 2001. "Who is Voting Early: An Individual Level Analysis." *Social Science Journal* 38: 51–64.
- Patterson, Samuel C., and Gregory A. Caldeira. 1983. "Getting Out the Vote: Participation in Gubernatorial Elections." *American Political Science Review* 77: 675–689.
- Rice, Tom W., and Hillary Schlueter. 2004. "Turnout in Small Elections: Rational Choice, Community, and Socio-Demographics in Iowa Mayoral Contents." Presented at the 2004 Midwest Political Science Convention, Chicago.
- Richardson, Lilliard E., and Grant W. Neeley. 1996. "The Impact of Early Voting on Turnout: The 1994 Elections in Tennessee." *State and Local Government Review* 28: 173–179.
- Rosenstone, Steven J., and John M. Hansen. 1993. *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America*. New York: Macmillan Publishing.
- Seelye, Katharine Q. 2004. "Michigan's Online Ballot Spurs New Strategies for Democrats." *New York Times*, January 10.
- Stein, Robert M., and Patricia A. Garcia-Monet. 1997. "Voting Early but Not Often." *Social Science Quarterly* 78: 657–671.
- US News and World Report*. 2004. www.usnews.com/usnews/edu/college/rankings. Accessed October 23.
- Wolfinger, Raymond E., and Stephen J. Rosenstone. 1980. *Who Votes?* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Wood, Curtis. 2002. "Voter Turnout in City Elections." *Urban Affairs Review* 38: 209–231.
- Wright, Stephen G. 1989. "Voter Turnout in Runoff Elections." *Journal of Politics* 51: 385–396.