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Iowa Voting Series, Paper 1: An Empirical Examination of Iowa Voter Registration Statistics Since 2000

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Abstract

In this short paper I take a look at Iowa's voter registration statistics since January, 2000. One goal of the paper is to help explain why Iowa is considered a swing state. Data for the examination come from the Iowa Secretary of State website which posts monthly updates on voter registration in the state. Results indicate that the number of registered voters in Iowa has remained fairly stable since 2000, much like its population. Registration between the two political parties (Democrats and Republicans) has also remained quite stable and fairly equal during the period with two exceptions: a lead opened up by Republicans in 2002-2003 and a larger lead opened up by Democrats in 2008-2009. In both instances the gap closed and the two parties returned to near equality. No Party voters (what Iowa calls registered voters who do not register with either political party) were always more numerous than those for either party.

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Updates

Unlike most academic papers I plan to regularly update the data for this paper. Data updates might lead to changes in the text as well. Below is a list of the updates as they occur.

- Initial release, December 2013
- Updated for January 2014 registration numbers
- Updated for February 2014 registration numbers, addition to title
- Updated for March 2014 registration numbers, added new footnote 5

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In this short paper I take an empirical look at Iowa's voter registration statistics since January, 2000. As an empirical examination I am going to focus on the statistics themselves and largely leave theorizing about the results for later. For similar reasons, I will not be citing any other works dealing with either voting in Iowa or in general.

Although I do not plan to put the results I find into a theoretical framework, there are questions I hope to answer in this examination. For the last several presidential election cycles Iowa has been seen as a swing state. In part this is due to its having gone for Democrat Al Gore in 2000 and then switched to Republican George W. Bush in 2004 in two very close elections. Iowa's presidential election results in 2008 were not that close, but the margin did tighten again in 2012.

Aside from election results, Iowa is also considered a swing state based on the party distribution of its registered voters. As will be shown below, since 2000 Iowa's registered voters roughly break down to about 32% Republicans and 32% Democrats with the remaining 36% No Party (i.e., independents). During that time the lead between Democrats and Republicans has changed four times (through December 2013), but No Party voters have always been more numerous.

Aside from the numbers themselves I will also look at them in relation to elections, presidential and midterm, as well as the Iowa Caucuses. Registering to vote in Iowa is fairly easy and can be done on the night of caucuses or day of voting. Changes around those events can provide some insight into the enthusiasm felt by one party or the other. A related consideration that is a bit longer term is the extent to which one party or the other is working to register new voters.

Data

Data for this examination were gathered from the Iowa Secretary of State's website.[1] The website presents voter registration figures by county and by Congressional District (as well as by state House and Senate districts). Because of occasional variations in the

[1] http://sos.iowa.gov/elections/voterreg/regstat.html

format of the reports during the time period considered, I made use of both the county and Congressional District reports to get the necessary registration figures for the state as a whole. The Secretary of State (SoS) updates the voter registration statistics on approximately the first of every month. The dates on the reports are sometimes a day or two after the first of the month due to weekends and holidays. Occasionally, the dates are well into a particular month due, I assume, to internal difficulties in gathering the data from the county auditors or other technical difficulties. Aside from such minor variations, there were also a few months for which the data were not available. This occurred for three (non-consecutive) months in 2002 as well as three months in 2006. For such missing data I simply interpolated a figure between those of available data points.

Without going into the specifics, under Iowa law voters can register for a political party if voters cast at least two percent of the ballots in the preceding general election for the candidate (president or governor) of that party. For part of the period examined here Iowa allowed voters to register for the Green Party. Despite peaking at 2,480 voters in January of 2003, because the gubernatorial Green Party candidate failed to achieve the two percent threshold in the 2002 elections the party lost certification and voters who were registered with the Green Party were transferred to No Party status.[2]

SoS voter registration reports also contain a column for "Other," meaning other than the recognized parties or No Party. For purposes of this examination figures for Green Party registrants or "Other" are added to the No Party totals.[3]

In addition to the two political parties currently recognized, Iowans may register for a recognized "nonparty political organization." To be recognized such an organization must have nominated a candidate for a federal or state-wide office who appeared on a general election ballot in the previous 10 years. Only two such organizations are currently available on the official Iowa voter registration form: Green and Libertarian.[4] Voters who register for the Green or Libertarian organizations are included in the Other category for state statistics and, as noted above, I have combined the Other and No Party categories.[5]

Iowa voter registrations are also divided between those that are "active" and those that are "inactive." When one registers to vote in Iowa he or she is initially considered an

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[2] Some counties were slower than others in making this transfer and SoS voter registration reports continued to have a column for the Green Party until mid-2006.
[3] The "Other" category did not appear in the SoS reports until January 2008.
[4] The official form can be found here: http://www.johnson-county.com/auditor/voter/vrform.pdf.
[5] In February 2014 the Iowa Secretary of State announced a fix to a technical glitch that had caused self-identified Libertarian or Green Party registrants as No Party on state documents. This may only affect voter ID cards, but I will watch for changes in the monthly reports. See http://www.desmoinesregister.com/article/20140222/NEWS09/302220062/1056/news05.

"active" voter. Voters who have not voted in two or more consecutive general elections are sent a "confirmation card" to determine whether they are still registered at the address last indicated on voter rolls. Following additional procedures, if such voters do not confirm their addresses as being in the county they are put on inactive status and may be removed from the voter registration rolls if they do not vote before another two consecutive general elections have passed.[6] The percentage of inactive voters at any time ranges from slightly under 5% to a bit over 11% with an average of about 7%.

In Figure 1[7], Iowa's number of total active voters and total voters are plotted from January, 2000, to present. The difference between the two lines represents the number of inactive voters. It is easy to see that the two lines track very closely (correlation of .92) with the exception of a period of a few months in mid-2012. For the most part, I will focus on active voters for this examination.

According to the 2000 census Iowa had a population of 2,926,324. By the time of the 2010 census that figure had increased to 3,046,355. This represented a modest growth of 4.1% for the decade. That growth rate was a bit lower than the 5.4% of the prior decade, but did allow Iowa to continue to make population gains after having lost population during the 1980s. Unfortunately for Iowa, that modest growth rate was below that of the rest of the country and the state went from five to four Congressional Districts following the 2010 census.

The relative stability of Iowa's population provides some context to an examination of Iowa's voter registration statistics.

Registered Voter Totals

Again, Figure 1 plots the monthly voter registration totals since January, 2000. During the first four and a half years of this period the active voter totals remained fairly stable with the biggest bump coming, not surprisingly, in the lead up to the 2000 general election. After hitting a low of about 1.78 million in June, 2003, the number of active voters rose in the lead up to the 2004 caucuses, but from then until the end of 2004 there was an even greater increase. As will be shown below, this spike in registered voters was largely driven by an increase in registered Democrats in the lead up to the 2004 general election. It is not surprising that the number of active voters decreased from this peak following the 2004 general election (at the very least because of the yearly

[6] I will not go into more detail, but for those interested Iowa's voter registration laws are found in Title II, Chapter 48A of the Iowa Code. See http://search.legis.state.ia.us/nxt/gateway.dll/ic?f=templates&fn=default.htm.

[7] It is a bit inconvenient for readers, but to make the figures larger I will put them at the end of the paper rather than within the text.

adjustments in the voter rolls). What is surprising is that it seemed to reach a plateau roughly 100,000 voters higher than in the first several years of the decade.

Since October, 2004, the number of active Iowa voters has ranged between 1.9 and 2.0 million, with only five exceptions. The first came in mid-2007when adjustments to the voter rolls pushed the number of active voters to just below the 1.9 million mark. Following that low, the number of active voters eventually surged to its all-time high of about 2.04 million following the 2008 general election. That surge was followed by a significant drop as the voter lists were adjusted in the first months of 2009. The number of active voters again climbed in the lead up to the 2010 elections, eventually just barely crossing the two million mark in January 2011. The fourth deviation came in mid-2012 when there was a sharp drop in active voters. The drop in total voters was not as large, so it appears that many active voters were moved to the inactive list.[8] Again, from this low the number of registrations surged to just over 2 million for the third time following the 2012 general election.

On the whole, the active voter totals reflect the general stability of Iowa's population. As previously noted, Iowa's population grew by 4.1% from 2000 to 2010. From January, 2000, to July 2004 the average number of active registered voters was 1,820,908. After the jump for the 2004 presidential election cycle the average grew to 1,950,068, an increase of about 7.1% Although this is above the percentage of population growth, it may very well reflect increased outreach efforts and methods over the last few election cycles. Aside from the new plateau reached after the 2004 election cycle, the bumps and dips in the active registration totals generally coincide with the caucuses and general elections as well as adjustments as voters are moved from the active to inactive lists.

Active Voter Distribution by Party

Figure 2 breaks out Iowa's active registered voters by party: Republican, Democrat, and No Party.[9] The first thing to notice is how closely the active voter registrations for Republicans and Democrats track together. The period begins with Republicans having roughly a 20,000 active voter registration advantage. This advantage is quite steady for the next two and a half years. From mid-2002 until the end of 2003 we see a widening gap between the two parties. Most of this gap occurred in the lead up to the 2002 elections. Although we would normally expect the party that does not control the White House to make gains in the midterm elections, such was not the case for 2002. Possible reasons for this might include post-9/11 feelings as well as a Republican base

[8] The excitement of the 2008 caucuses and general election likely brought out many new voters who may have not voted in later elections. If such new voters did not vote again through the next two general elections, 2010 and 2012, they would have been moved to inactive status.

[9] Recall that "No Party" is how Iowa refers to independent voters. Also, for purposes of this examination voters registered as anything other than Republican or Democrat are grouped with No Party voters.

energized over the disappointment of Senator Jim Jeffords (R-VT) leaving the Republican party and throwing control of the Senate to the Democrats. Regardless of the reasons for it, Republicans enjoyed a voter registration advantage of over 50,000 for the 2002 midterm elections and through 2003.[10]

Throughout 2004 Democrats made substantial gains in their voter registration numbers. This is not surprising given that they were the party not in control of the White House and with no clear frontrunner the competition among the various Democrats contending for the nomination generated a lot of interest. Democrats continued to build on their gains from the caucuses through the general election. Had it not been for a surge in Republican voter registrations prior to the general election Democrats would have surpassed Republicans in active voter registrations for the first time in the period. As it was, Democrats did pull within about 4,000 registered voters of the Republicans.

For the next 18 months active voter registrations for Republicans and Democrats again tracked very closely, including a dip during the first half of 2006. The small spike in registrations for Democrats in July, 2006, was largely due to a spirited primary for the gubernatorial nomination. Active voter registrations again tracked very closely for the two parties over the next year and a half, though with Democrats enjoying an advantage of 20,000 or so voters.

Given the overall interest in the 2008 caucuses, it is a little surprising that voter registration figures for both parties did not increase more during the latter half of 2007. This changed dramatically for the Democrats during the month of the 2008 caucuses. During January, 2008, there were over 58,000 additional voter registrations for Democrats. This was the largest one-month change for any party during the period examined. What is particularly interesting about this increase, however, is that it apparently came at the expense of No Party registrations.

As a reminder, the Iowa Caucuses are events put on by the political parties. To participate one must be a member of the party, Democrats or Republicans, holding the caucus you wish to attend. Voters registered as No Party do not have a caucus. If they wish to attend a party caucus they must reregister to vote and declare membership as a Democrat or Republican.[11] Although both parties had "open" caucuses in 2008 (i.e., there was no incumbent running), there was far more interest on the Democrats' side. There are two basic reasons for this. First, after two terms it is usually hard for the

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[10] Interestingly, this advantage did not help Republicans in several state-wide races in 2002 as their candidates lost in attempts to unseat incumbent Democrats including Governor Tom Vilsack and Senator Tom Harkin.

[11] For caucus night, officials for each precinct are provided a list of voters registered in their precinct for that party. Anyone wishing to participate in that precinct's caucus must reregister, regardless of whether the person had not been previously registered to vote in Iowa, was registered in the other party or as No Party, or was registered for one of the nonparty political organizations.

president's party to generate as much interest as the opposition party whose base is more eager to regain the White House. Second, the battle between Democrats Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, and the historic nature of the nomination of either of them, generated far more interest than the Republican contest where the ultimate nominee (McCain) chose to largely skip Iowa. Thus, No Party voters looking to participate in one of the caucuses were much more likely to choose to caucus with the Democrats. As a result, No Party voter registrations declined by over 49,000 during the month of the caucuses.

Compare the voter registration changes for the 2008 caucuses with those for the 2004 caucuses. Although Democrats gained over 20,000 additional registered voters for the 2004 caucus month, No Party registrations only declined by about 5,000 (as did Republican registrations).

Also compare voter registration changes during the 2008 caucuses with those later in the year for the general election. The last few months of the campaign saw additional sharp increases in voter registrations for the Democrats. No Party registrations also increased sharply through the general election. Republican voter registrations also increased, but their gains were much more modest.

Following the January 2009 relative peak in voter registrations for both parties and No Party voters, all three groups experienced drops as active voters were moved to the inactive list. Republicans then experienced a period of relative stability through mid-2010, but the number of registered Democrats began a period of steady decline that lasted until mid-2012.

The sharp increase in the number of Republican voter registrations for June, 2010, was due to a sharply contested primary for the gubernatorial nomination. Just as a large portion of the Democrats' gains for the 2008 caucuses seemed to be at the expense of No Party voters, the roughly 38,000 voter registration gain by Republicans following the 2010 primary corresponded to a loss of about 23,000 No Party registrants.

The number of registered voters for both parties and No Party voters decreased sharply in the first half of 2012 as the yearly adjustments from active to inactive status were greater than usual.[12] Even so, there were sharp increases in voter registrations for Democrats and No Party voters, and more modest gains for Republicans.

As the period in the graph ends (March 2014) Republican registrations have once again pulled ahead of those of Democrats by about 2,700 voters. No Party registrations had

[12] Notice that in Figure 1 we do not see a sharp decrease in total voters, only in the active category. I was told by staff in my county auditor's office that the larger than usual adjustment was due in part to data from the 2010 Census that were used in the process.

been increasing steadily since mid-2013, but the annual adjustment in early 2014 erased most of those gains. Registration figures are likely to remain relatively stable through mid-2014. Several candidates are competing for the Republican nomination for an open US Senate seat which should drive up Republican voter registrations. In contrast, although there are a few Democrats competing for their gubernatorial nomination, the winner will be facing an incumbent (Governor Branstad) who at this point appears fairly strong. Thus, it is less likely that race will generate as much excitement among Democrats.

Party Distribution by Percentage

Finally, although Figure 2 does a fairly good job of portraying the relative strength of the two parties it is worthwhile to consider the number of each party's active voters as a percentage of Iowa's total.

Figure 3 once again shows the stability in the relative strength of the two parties in Iowa. For the most part, the two parties were of nearly equal strength throughout the period. The only major exception was the significant gain achieved by Democrats following the 2008 caucuses. The percentage difference between the two parties was maximized in March 2009. For the next three years the percentages for Democrats and Republicans moved toward each other until Republicans pulled slightly ahead in April 2012.

As noted earlier, although Democrats and Republicans have occasionally pulled ahead of each other during the period, No Party voters have always had more registered active voters. The closest either party came to equaling the percentage of No Party active voters was in July 2008 when Democrats came within 0.12%.

The percentage of No Party active voters is interesting in that it was quite stable. With the usual ups and downs, the percentage between January 2000 and February 2008 (the first month after the caucus registrations were added) mostly remained between 37% and 39%. The large shift of No Party registrants to the Democrats is shown in the February 2008 numbers, presumably to participate in the caucuses, seems to have created a new plateau. Since February 2008 the No Party percentage has dropped roughly two percentage points and has ranged between about 35% and 37%. Interestingly, the three low percentage points for No Party registrants came in the July figures for 2008, 2010, and 2012, which were the first figures following Iowa's closed primaries.[13]

[13] Voters must be registered as a Democrat or Republican to participate in the primaries for those parties, but can change their registration as late as the day of the primary.

Concluding Comments

In discussing the data presented in the three figures I have emphasized their relative stability. The vertical axes of the figures, as you may have noticed, show rather narrow ranges of the numbers or percentages. In Figure 3, for example, the percentage of registered voters for the three categories (Democrats, Republicans, and No Party voters) ranges from only a bit above 29% to a bit under 41%. The range for just Democrats and Republicans in the same figure is only the six percentage points between 29% and 35%.

This stability is despite the best efforts of the two parties to gain voters. With the exception of the 2008 presidential election cycle, the changes between Democrats and Republicans have been marginal. Nevertheless, those small changes can make a difference. Moreover, the larger block of No Party voters are fair game for either party. Democrats were very successful in moving a block of No Party voters to their column in 2008. The Republicans had similar success in 2010, if a bit less substantial. For the most part, it is the large block of No Party voters that determine election outcomes in Iowa, particularly at the presidential level. That is what makes Iowa a swing state.

Finally, let me make a brief comment on candidates competing in the Iowa Caucuses. For the last few caucus cycles some have argued that moderate Republicans do not have a chance in Iowa. The basis for this argument is that social conservatives are a dominant force in Iowa Republican politics so moderates have little hope of winning the caucuses. Although social conservatives are certainly an important group of Iowa Republicans, they are not so numerous or such an overwhelming force that a Republican who is perceived as a moderate on some issues cannot compete. As noted in the discussion of Figure 2, a candidate or candidates who energize voters can increase the number participating in the caucuses by tapping into the large group of No Party voters, as Democrats did in 2008 and Republicans did in 2012.

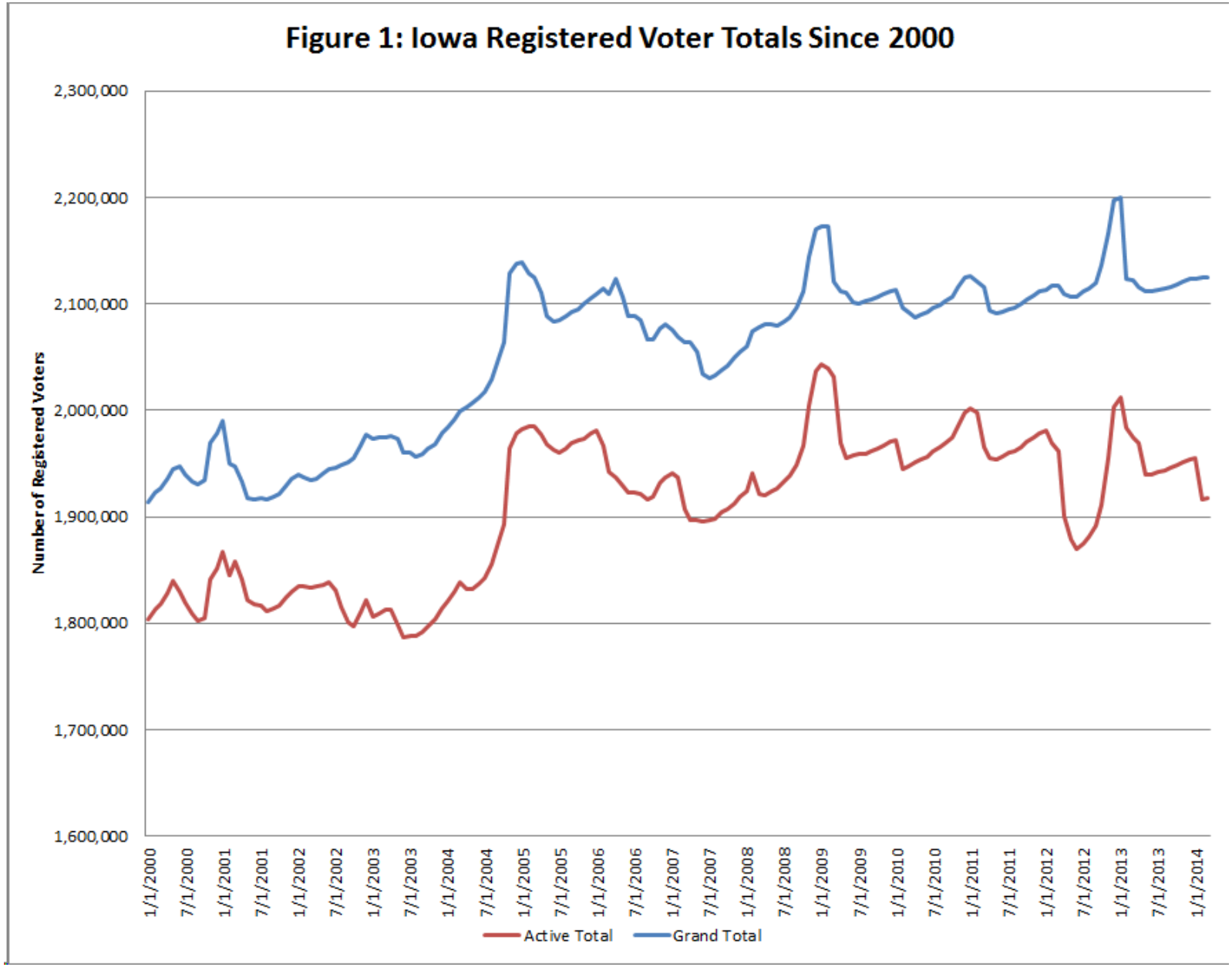
Figure 1: Iowa Registered Voter Totals Since 2000
Number of Registered Voters
2,300,000
2,200,000
2,100,000
2,000,000
1,900,000
1,800,000
1,700,000
1,600,000
1/1/2000
7/1/2000
1/1/2001
7/1/2001
1/1/2002
7/1/2002
1/1/2003
7/1/2003
1/1/2004
7/1/2004
1/1/2005
7/1/2005
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7/1/2006
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1/1/2008
7/1/2008
1/1/2009
7/1/2009
1/1/2010
7/1/2010
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7/1/2011
1/1/2012
7/1/2012
1/1/2013
7/1/2013
1/1/2014
Active Total
Grand Total

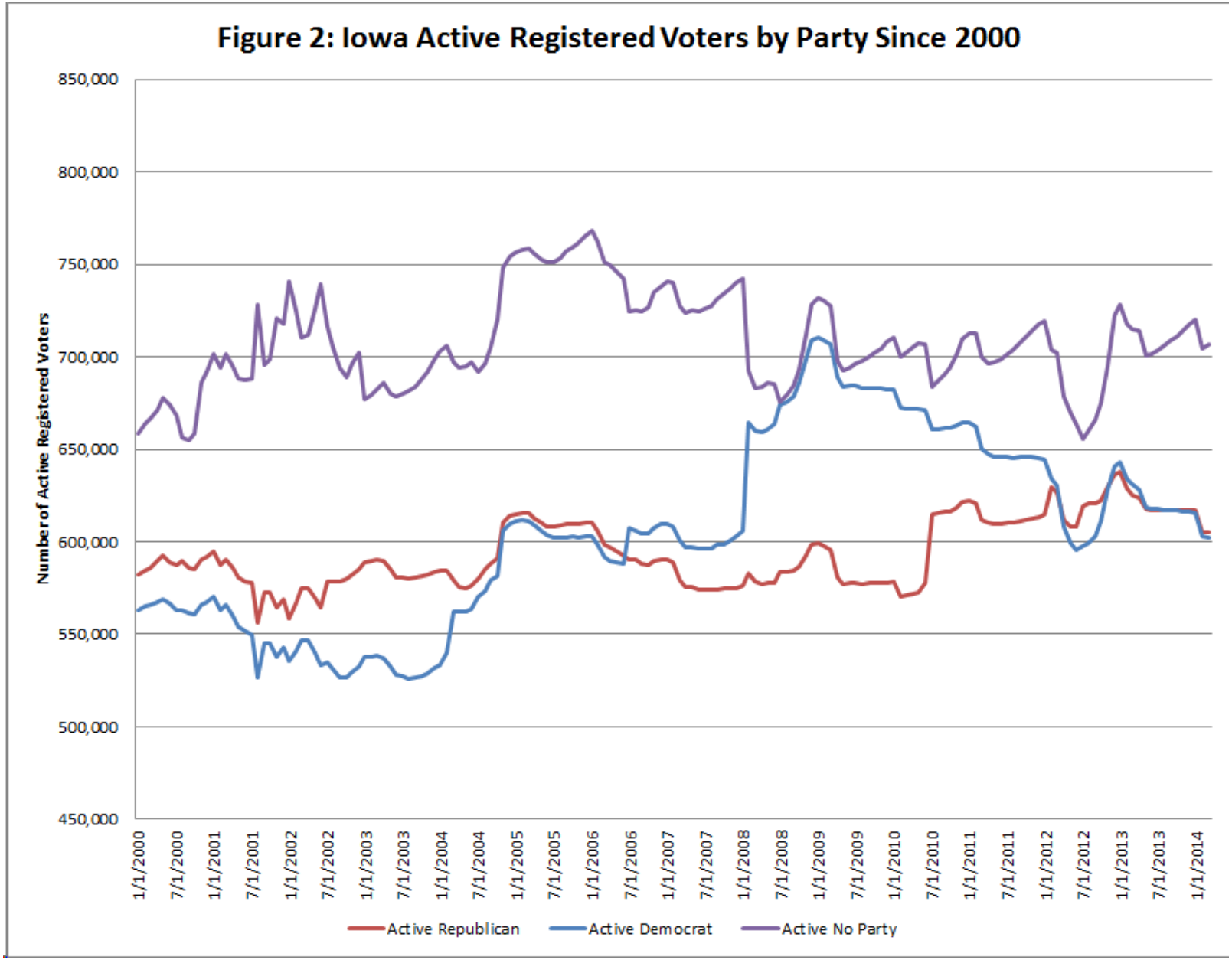
Figure 2: Iowa Active Registered Voters by Party Since 2000
Number of Active Registered Voters
850,000
800,000
750,000
700,000
650,000
600,000
550,000
500,000
450,000
1/1/2000
7/1/2000
1/1/2001
7/1/2001
1/1/2002
7/1/2002
1/1/2003
7/1/2003
1/1/2004
7/1/2004
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7/1/2009
1/1/2010
7/1/2010
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1/1/2013
7/1/2013
1/1/2014
Active Republican
Active Democrat
Active No Party

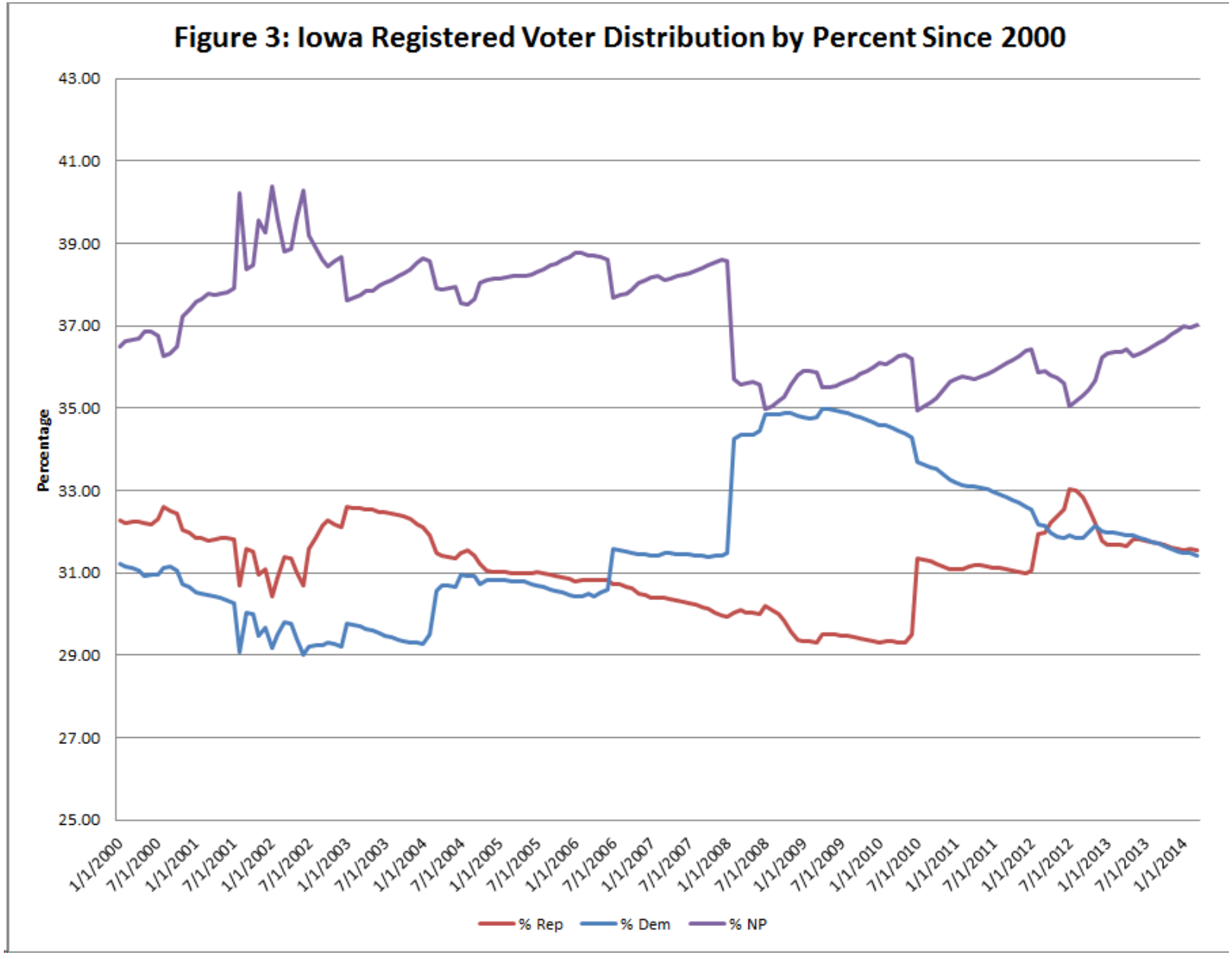
Figure 3: Iowa Registered Voter Distribution by Percent Since 2000
Percentage
43.00
41.00
39.00
37.00
35.00
33.00
31.00
29.00
27.00
25.00
1/1/2000
7/1/2000
1/1/2001
7/1/2001
1/1/2002
7/1/2002
1/1/2003
7/1/2003
1/1/2004
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7/1/2009
1/1/2010
7/1/2010
1/1/2011
7/1/2011
1/1/2012
7/1/2012
1/1/2013
7/1/2013
1/1/2014
% Rep
% Dem
% NP