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Iowa Voting Series, Paper 2: An Examination of Iowa Turnout Statistics

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Abstract

This is the second paper in a series examining aspects of voting in Iowa. In this short paper I take a look at Iowa's turnout in presidential and midterm elections since 2000. Turnout for voters registered as Democrats or Republicans is quite good, but turnout for No Party voters (Iowa's name for independents) is much lower. Republican turnout in the period examined is always higher than that of Democrats, but with only one exception the two track fairly closely. Consistent with conventional wisdom turnout is much lower in midterm election years. The drop for Democrats and Republicans is roughly 15%, but is over 25% for No Party voters. Despite the lower turnout of No Party voters they tend to determine the outcome of Iowa elections because of the near parity of voters in the two major parties. As a group, the No Party voters seem willing to swing from one party to the other depending on the election, but also seem to have a tendency to support Democrats a bit more.

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Updates

Unlike most academic papers I plan to update the data for this paper as elections occur. 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; fixed some typos after posting
- Addition to title, January 2014

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In this short paper I examine Iowa's turnout statistics in midterm and presidential elections since 2000.¹ As with the first paper in this series² my focus will be on the statistics involved rather than theorizing about the reasons for particular turnout percentages. Nevertheless, the goal of this paper, like the first in the series, is to examine aspects of voting in Iowa with an eye to future elections. This is important because it will provide some background and context to discussions about Iowa voters.

Data

Data for this examination were gathered from the Election Results & Statistics page of the Iowa Secretary of State's website.³ This page provides links to election results for a variety of primary and election contests in Iowa, including those for presidential and midterm elections. The turnout statistics examined here are obtained from the Statewide Statistical Reports links.⁴ The information in these reports is broken out by gender and party as well as by age group. For each subgroup, the number who voted absentee⁵ is also indicated.

General Election Turnout

Figure 1⁶, shows the turnout percentage of Iowa voters in general elections from 2000 to 2012. This period covers four presidential elections and three midterm elections. The

¹ I should note at the outset that when I refer to turnout in "presidential elections" or "midterm elections" it is a shorthand way of referring to turnout in that year in general not specifically for a particular contest. Certainly some who vote in a particular election do not do so for every contest. As noted below, the data considered here are from statewide turnout statistics not from any particular contest except when a particular race is used as an example.

² "An Empirical Examination of Iowa Voter Registration Statistics" currently available at <http://www.uiowa.edu/~030116/papersframe.htm>.

³ <http://sos.iowa.gov/elections/results/index.html>

⁴ For example, the turnout statistics for the 2000 presidential election can be found at <http://sos.iowa.gov/elections/pdf/2000StateWithLinnDemo.pdf>

⁵ Without getting into the specifics, "absentee" voting in Iowa takes several forms, including traditional mail-in absentee voting plus early voting at satellite stations and at the offices of the county Auditors.

⁶ 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.

height of the bars represents the total number of registered voters. Except for a slight decline for the 2002 election (due to adjustments following the 2000 census), the number of registered voters in Iowa has slowly but steadily increased in the last dozen years.⁷ The turnout percentage for the elections has also been steady, though there is a clear difference between presidential and midterm years. The turnout in presidential elections has varied only a few percentage points between 71.57% and 75.96%. Although the turnout for midterm elections has also varied within a narrow range (52.71% to 56.35%), that range is substantially lower than for presidential elections. The average turnout in presidential years is 73.36%, but only 54.01% in midterm years. Those who follow politics are well aware of the much lower turnout for midterm elections, but it is worth knowing just how substantial the difference is. This is particularly true in a state that is fairly evenly balanced between the two major parties. More specifically, knowing who turns out, particularly in midterm elections, can aid parties and candidates in their get out the vote (GOTV) efforts.

Before continuing I should note that there are different ways of calculating turnout percentage. Some use as the base line the voting age population. Others use the number of those who are eligible to vote (i.e., not counting those who have lost their voting rights). For present purposes I am using the number registered to vote. How many Iowans are not registered, whether eligible or not, is a separate matter.⁸ I am also not considering how Iowa compares with other states in terms of turnout. Nevertheless, one set of statistics for recent elections shows Iowa to be regularly near the top in terms of voter eligible turnout.⁹

Figure 2 shows the number of Iowans registered as Democrat, Republican, or No Party (Iowa's name for independents).¹⁰ For all elections since 2000 No Party registrants have been more numerous than those of either party. The advantage between Democrats and Republicans has varied over the last dozen years, with Republicans having the lead at the beginning of the period, Democrats taking a large lead for 2008, but the parties essentially returning to parity after 2012.

⁷ See the paper mentioned in footnote 2 for more details.

⁸ Clearly the turnout efforts of campaigns focus on registering people to vote as well as getting them to cast a ballot. Nevertheless, those already registered are more likely to be interested in the political process and therefore more likely to vote, on average, than those not registered. Identifying and registering those who are eligible is an additional process that requires treatment separate from the focus of this short paper.

⁹ See the United States Elections Project at http://elections.gmu.edu/voter_turnout.htm. Click on the links to see results for elections since 2000.

¹⁰ For purposes of this paper I am not considering those who were able to register for the Green Party for a short period of time in Iowa. Again, see the paper mentioned in footnote 2 for more details.

Given the near parity between registered Democrats and Republicans, the turnout of each party, as well as the extent to which either party can appeal to No Party voters, is critical in terms of winning state-wide elections.¹¹

Figure 3 shows the turnout percentage for each party and No Party voters in midterm and presidential elections since 2000. As indicated in Figure 1, we can clearly see that the sharp drop in turnout for midterm elections affects Democrats, Republicans, and No Party voters. Unlike Democrats and Republicans, however, the drop in turnout is much more substantial for No Party voters.

With one exception the turnout percentages of Democrats and Republicans track very closely in both presidential and midterm election years. In 2000 and 2002 Republican turnout was about 4% higher. In 2004, 2006, and 2008 Republicans led by about 2%. The exception came in 2010 when Republican turnout was 14.5% higher than that of Democrats. In 2012, the difference was reduced to a bit over 5%.

There are two things to consider regarding the turnout difference between Democrats and Republicans: enthusiasm and the number of registered voters.

Enthusiasm

Many speak of the enthusiasm of the base (meaning core members of the party) as an important factor in an election.¹² The assumption is that if the base is less enthusiastic or energized some will be less likely to vote. This seems to have had only a minor effect on Republican turnout in Iowa. In looking at the results of the 2000 election some have argued that a number of Republican voters did not vote because they did not feel George W. Bush was sufficiently conservative. That may have been the case, but the Republican turnout percentage in 2000 was 81.26%, which was slightly higher than that of 2008 (80.07%) and only a bit lower than 2004 and 2012 (83.77% and 82.22%, respectively). On the other hand, given that Al Gore won Iowa in 2000 by only 4,144 votes even a 1% increase in Republican turnout (to the 2012 level) would have made a difference.

Notwithstanding the example of 2000, the effect of the enthusiasm on Republican turnout was minimal, though it did seem to follow general expectations for presidential years. The base will usually be enthusiastic about reelecting a president of their party and this seemed to be the case for Republicans as they had their highest turnout of the

¹¹ Although voter registrations between the two parties are fairly equal state-wide, there are clear differences in the Congressional Districts as well as in the state legislative districts. In this paper I am only considering state-wide races and results.

¹² There are, of course, a variety of measures of "enthusiasm" as shown in different polls. For this paper I am only considering enthusiasm in general terms.

period in 2004. Conversely, it is often more difficult for the base to be excited after eight years of their party holding the presidency and 2008 proved to be the low point for Republicans in presidential elections during this period. One could argue that a party's base should be energized when attempting to defeat a president of the other party running for reelection. This was basically true for Iowa Republicans in 2012 when their turnout percentage of 82.22% was the second highest of the four presidential elections in this period (but still about 1.5% behind the high in 2004). One possible reason why Republican turnout in 2012 did not surpass that of 2004 may have been a lack of enthusiasm on the part of some Republicans for Mitt Romney. Although Romney came within a few votes of winning the 2012 Iowa Caucuses, he was not the choice of many conservatives who voted for Santorum, Perry, Cain, Gingrich, or Bachmann (not to mention the more Libertarian-oriented supporters of Ron Paul).

The average drop in turnout for Iowa Republicans in midterm years is about 14%, down to 67.97%. In terms of the variation, it is not surprising that the lowest turnout was in 2006, the sixth year of George W. Bush's presidency. What is a bit surprising is that the turnout percentage was a bit lower in 2010 than in 2002. It was clear that 2010 was going to be a strong year for Republicans and the base was certainly energized, but the turnout percentage was about 1% below that of 2002. Two reasons Republicans in 2002 may have been a bit more energized than expected are that it was the first post-9/11 election and the defection of Senator Jim Jeffords of Vermont from the Republican Party in 2001 that returned control of the Senate to the Democrats. Regardless of the reasons, it seems that enthusiasm of the base is a factor in turnout in midterm years, as it is in presidential years, but not a major one.

Turning to the Democrats, with one exception enthusiasm also does not seem to be a major factor affecting their turnout in Iowa.

In the presidential years presented here the turnout of Democrats is fairly consistent ranging from a low in 2012 of 76.94% to a high in 2004 of 81.82% and an average of the four presidential years of 78.52%. There are three points to highlight in these figures. The first is that the turnout was higher in 2004 than 2008. Although this is consistent with Republican turnout in those years, the circumstances were different. Where Republicans were defending an incumbent president in 2004, Democrats were seeking to unseat a president of the other party. Although both situations have a tendency to energize the base voters, we might have expected Democrats to have had a bit higher turnout (though it was the highest of the four presidential elections presented here).

The second point to highlight is the Democrats' 2008 turnout. After eight years of a Republican president and a poor economy and with anti-war sentiment running high it would seem that 2008 should have been when Democrats had their highest turnout. Not surprisingly, it was the lowest presidential year turnout for the Republicans, but only second highest for the Democrats. One explanation may be that the enthusiasm

generated by the 2012 Iowa Caucuses which produced a sharp increase in registered Democrats had waned somewhat by election time.

The third point to highlight is the slight reduction in turnout for Iowa Democrats in 2012. As noted before, we might expect the party base to be energized when their incumbent president is up for reelection, but a poor economy along with other factors made 2012 a more difficult election for Democrats than might have been expected. In short, for some the potential of Obama's presidency in 2008 did not become the reality of 2012. Nevertheless, the Obama campaign recognized the reduction in enthusiasm and worked very hard on their turnout efforts to minimize the damage. Their efforts proved successful in that the Democrats' 2012 turnout (lowest of the four presidential elections) was only slightly less than that of 2000 (76.94% versus 77.13%).

The Democrats' turnout in midterm election years is roughly similar to that of Republicans with one major exception, 2010. Both 2006 and 2010 were considered "wave" election years, the former for Republicans and the latter for Democrats. Although Republicans were unenthusiastic about their prospects in 2006, and had their lowest midterm election turnout that year, the drop from other midterm years was only about 5% from the average of the other two (2002 and 2010). In contrast, Democrats' turnout in 2010, a year in which they were unenthusiastic, was about 7.5% below their average in 2002 and 2006. Of course, comparing turnout for the two parties' voters in two different elections is not indicative of the results for any particular election. That is where seeing the gap in turnout for a particular election comes into play and the turnout gap between Democrats and Republicans was much larger in 2010 than 2006. Having said that, I should note that Democrats picked up two of Iowa's then-five U.S. House seats in 2006 (one open, the other by beating an incumbent Republican) but Republicans did not take any back in 2010. Iowa Republicans did, however, make significant gains in state races in 2010, including the Governor and Secretary of State offices as well as the majority in the state House and gains in the state Senate.

Turnout in Relation to Registered Voters

Considering turnout percentages is important, but they must be looked at in relation to a party's voter registration numbers. The clearest way to illustrate this may be to use the 2008 figures. For the 2008 election Republicans had 613,656 registered voters. Of those, 491,342 (80.07%) voted. As shown in Figure 3, that turnout percentage was a bit higher than the Democrats' turnout, which was 78.20%. Nevertheless, Figure 2 shows that for the 2008 election Democrats had a decided lead in registered voters. More

specifically, the 78.20% turnout meant that of 726,795 registered Democrats, 568,377 voted. Thus, Democrats effectively had a built in lead of roughly 77,000 votes.¹³

Having used the 2000 election as an example above, let me do so again here. In 2000 Republicans had their largest voter registration advantage of the four presidential elections. That year 456,664 of the 561,963 registered Republicans voted (81.26%). In contrast, 411,920 of the 534,059 registered Democrats voted (77.13%). The larger number of registered voters and higher turnout rate gave Republicans an initial advantage of nearly 45,000 votes (but see below for more on this).

As a third example consider 2010. Following the surge in voter registrations for the 2008 caucuses Democrats still held a lead of slightly over 51,000 voters for the 2010 elections (as shown in Figure 2). Nevertheless, as can be seen in Figure 3, 2010 was also the year where the turnout gap between the two parties was the largest with Republicans at 68.98% and Democrats at 56.48%. Thus, despite the Democrats' registration advantage over 52,000 more Republicans voted in 2010 (395,312 Democrats compared to 447,445 Republicans).

There are two points worth making here. The first is that although one party might have an advantage based on a combination of voter registration and turnout percentage, it does not guarantee victory. As noted previously, Democrat Al Gore won Iowa in 2000 despite the Republican voter registration advantage and higher turnout rate that year. In round numbers, Gore received about 50,000 more votes from No Party voters which allowed him a narrow victory in Iowa.

The second point also involves No Party voters. The voter registration advantage between the two parties has changed several times even in the short period examined here. Republicans have consistently had better turnout rates, but the difference is usually small. With such a balance between the two parties it means, not surprisingly, that No Party voters determine the outcome of most elections.

No Party Voters

It is hardly surprising that No Party voters will be the ones who determine the outcomes in Iowa elections. We usually think of such "independents" as being in the middle ideologically between the two major parties. Even with that understanding, however, it is possible for an electorate to be shifted significantly to one side or the other or the middle voters to be so few that an outcome is rarely in doubt. This is one reason why we can refer to states in shorthand as being "Red" or "Blue." Swing states

¹³ Of course, not all registered members of a party will vote for their party's candidate. The actual percentage of such defections varies, often depending specifically on the candidate. Other things being equal, we can generally assume that such defections are roughly equal between the two major parties.

are often referred to as “Purple” and it is for such states that winning the vote of the ideological middle becomes critically important. Iowa is such a state.

As shown in Figure 2, No Party voters have outnumbered those of either party for the entire period examined. There are several reasons why a voter may choose to register as No Party rather than as a Democrat or Republican. The simplest reason is that the person is ideologically between the two parties in terms of the issues he or she cares about. On the other hand, some voters may be sufficiently to the extreme left or right that they do not want to be associated with either party. Some may not be particularly interested in politics in general but still feel it is their civic duty to vote so register No Party. A few Iowa voters register as No Party in the false hope that it will cut down on calls and mailings during caucus season.¹⁴ Some, such as business owners, may just want to appear neutral, particularly in a county that may be dominated by one party or the other. Regardless of the reason, the number of No Party voters means they are an important force in Iowa elections.

Despite the importance of No Party voters in determining the outcome of elections in Iowa, they have a much lower turnout rate than either of the two parties, as shown in Figure 3. In presidential years, the average No Party turnout is 62.28%, over 16% less than Democrats and nearly 20% less than Republicans. For midterm elections the drop off for No Party voters is much steeper than for Democrats or Republicans. The average turnout percentage for the three midterm elections is 36.40%, nearly 26% below the average of the four presidential elections. In contrast, the average midterm drop off for Democrats is about 17% and that of Republicans about 14%.

In presidential elections turnout for No Party voters ranged from a low of 60.04% in 2000 to a high of 65.08% in 2004. This spread of 5.04% is not too different from that of Democrats (4.88%) or Republicans (3.70%). More interesting is that the No Party turnout in midterm elections is quite consistent from a low of 35.62% in 2006 to a high of 37.17% in 2002. This spread of only 1.55% is much lower than that of Democrats (9.31%) or Republicans (5.14%). One possible explanation for the consistency of the turnout rate for No Party voters in midterm elections is that there is a core group of voters who are sufficiently interested in the political process to vote, but nevertheless choose not to identify with either of the major parties.

Although the turnout rate for No Party voters is relatively low, particularly in midterm elections, it is still sufficient to determine election outcomes given the near parity between the two major parties. Consider the example of the race for Iowa governor in

¹⁴ The Iowa Caucuses are party events, meaning one must be a registered Democrat or Republican to attend. One can, however, register or reregister for the appropriate party as late as the night of the caucuses. Caucus candidates will look for supporters within their own party, but also No Party voters and even those who are eligible to vote but unregistered. Thus, No Party voters may end up being contacted by candidates for *both* parties.

the 2006 midterm election year. Although Democrats held a voter registration advantage of just under 24,000 nearly 1,500 more Republicans voted. No Party turnout was at its lowest that year (35.62%), but that still resulted in 273,094 voters casting ballots. The gubernatorial contest was won by Democrat Chet Culver by about 102,000 votes, suggesting that No Party voters broke for him by over 2-to-1. Four years later Democrats had an even larger advantage in voter registrations of over 51,000, but turned out 52,000 fewer voters than Republicans. In the 2010 gubernatorial race incumbent Democrat Culver ran against Republican former-Governor Terry Branstad and lost by about 108,000 votes. Although the Republican turnout advantage was substantial, the 281,546 No Party voters who turned out broke in favor of Branstad.

In presidential election years No Party voter turnout increases making them an even more important group. The previously mentioned 2000 election provides a good example. In that year Republicans had their largest voter registration advantage and turned out nearly 45,000 more voters, but the 437,947 No Party voters who turned out favored Democrat Gore sufficiently to provide him with a victory by 4,144 votes.

Concluding Comments

At a basic level, the Iowa turnout data confirm the conventional wisdom that No Party voters determine the outcome in state-wide elections. The data also confirm for Iowa substantial differences in the turnout rate in presidential and midterm election years. It is interesting to see that the drop in turnout in midterm elections is relatively consistent between the two major parties, but substantially higher for No Party voters.

There are various reasons for the drop in turnout in midterm elections. One factor usually mentioned is that midterm elections do not have the unifying figure of a presidential nominee at the top of the ticket. That is true, but it is more important that the money that comes with a presidential campaign is also absent. The additional money of a presidential campaign pays for much more media advertising, but also helps fund various grassroots activities, both of which increase interest and issue awareness among more marginal voters.¹⁵

The drop in turnout for midterm election years suggests a need to approach turnout differently in presidential and midterm years. Again, this is certainly no surprise given the different resources generally available. Campaigns in midterm election years must generally make do with fewer resources. Critical to such midterm election efforts is the

¹⁵ Midterm “wave” elections often have a unifying theme that in some sense takes the place of a presidential candidate at the top of the ticket. The 1994 midterms had this with the “Contract with America.” The midterms of 2006 and 2010 discussed here both had unifying themes as well. Although such unifying themes or issues may increase interest it tends to not increase the money available for GOTV efforts.

understanding of the greater difficulty in turning out No Party voters, particularly those who at least seem willing to vote in presidential election years. This is where the trend of micro-targeting may become a critical factor.

Democrats are usually credited with having a better turnout operation than Republicans. It is interesting, therefore, that the turnout rate for Republicans has been consistently higher. On the other hand, there is some suggestion in the data that Democrats may be doing a better job of reaching out to possible supporters within the group of No Party voters. As mentioned previously, the results in the 2006 gubernatorial election suggest No Party voters strongly favored Culver. In 2010, they favored Branstad, but not as heavily. Similar results for 2000 and 2004 suggest Democrats may be doing a better job of identifying their supporters within the No Party voters. Iowa Republicans also work to engage No Party voters, but it appears their efforts need to be improved if they wish to effectively compete for the large block of No Party voters.

Figure 1: Iowa Registered Voters, Number Voting, and Turnout Percentage 2000 Through 2012 Elections

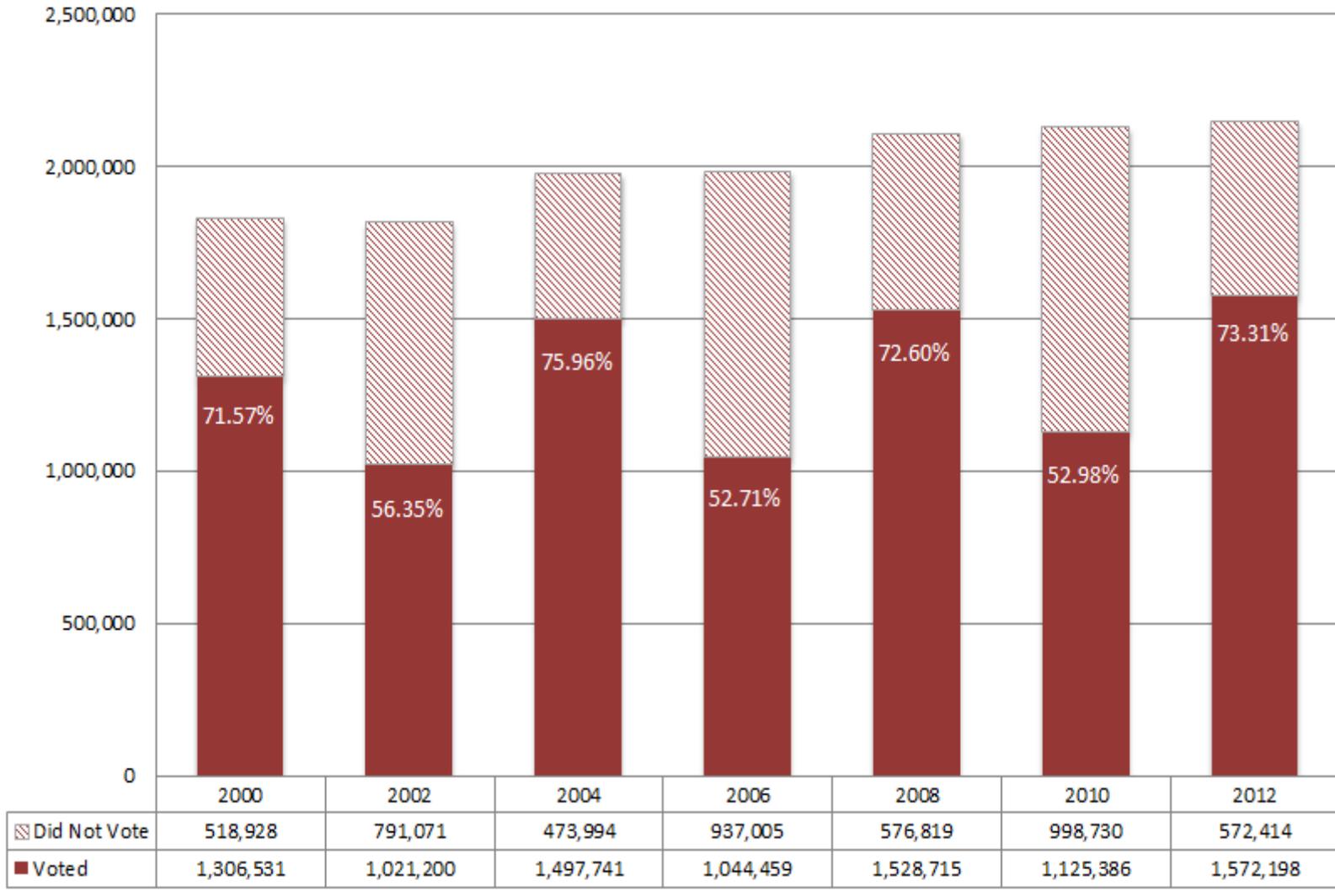


Figure 2: Iowa Registered Voters by Party in Election Years Since 2000

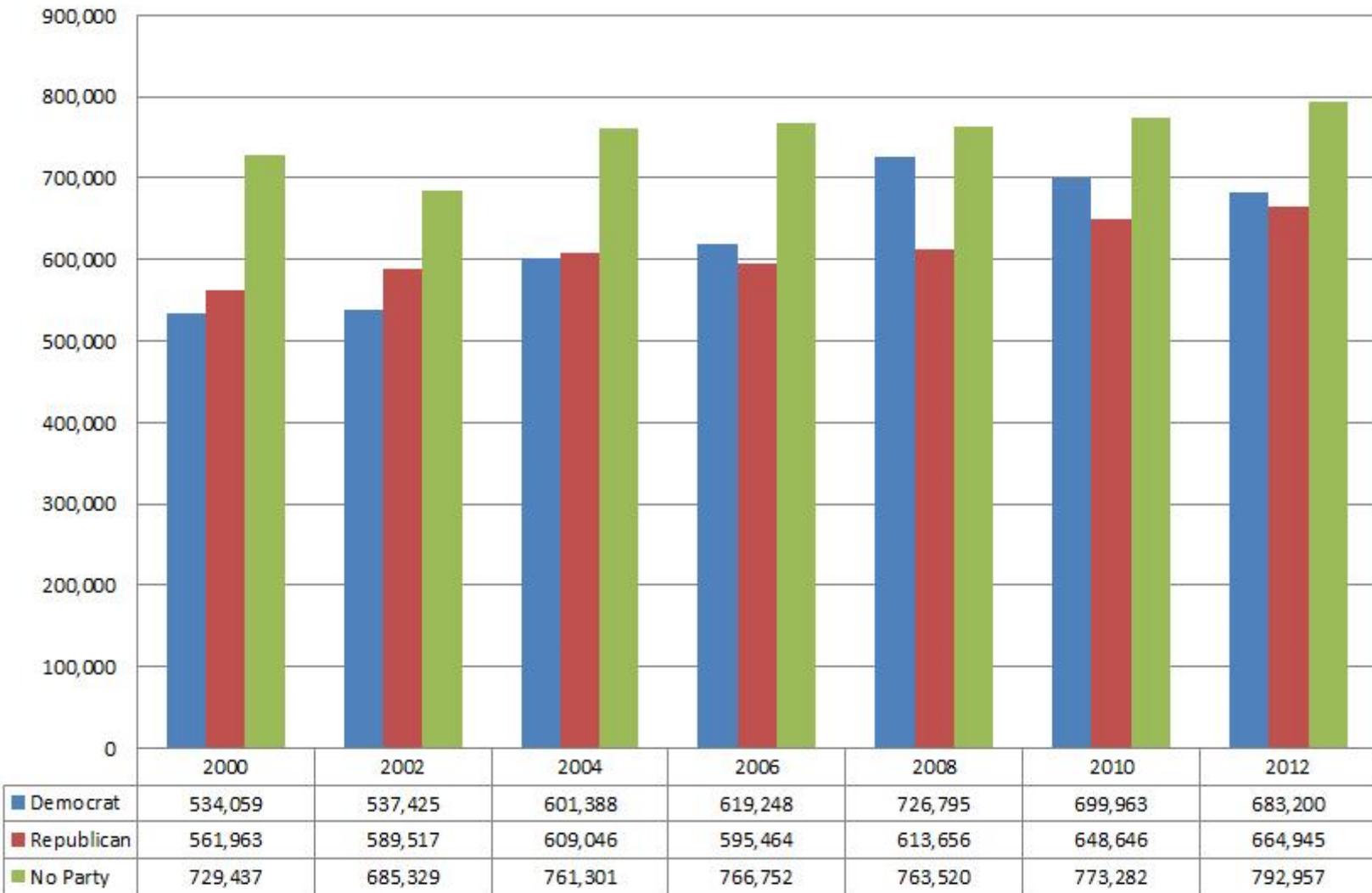
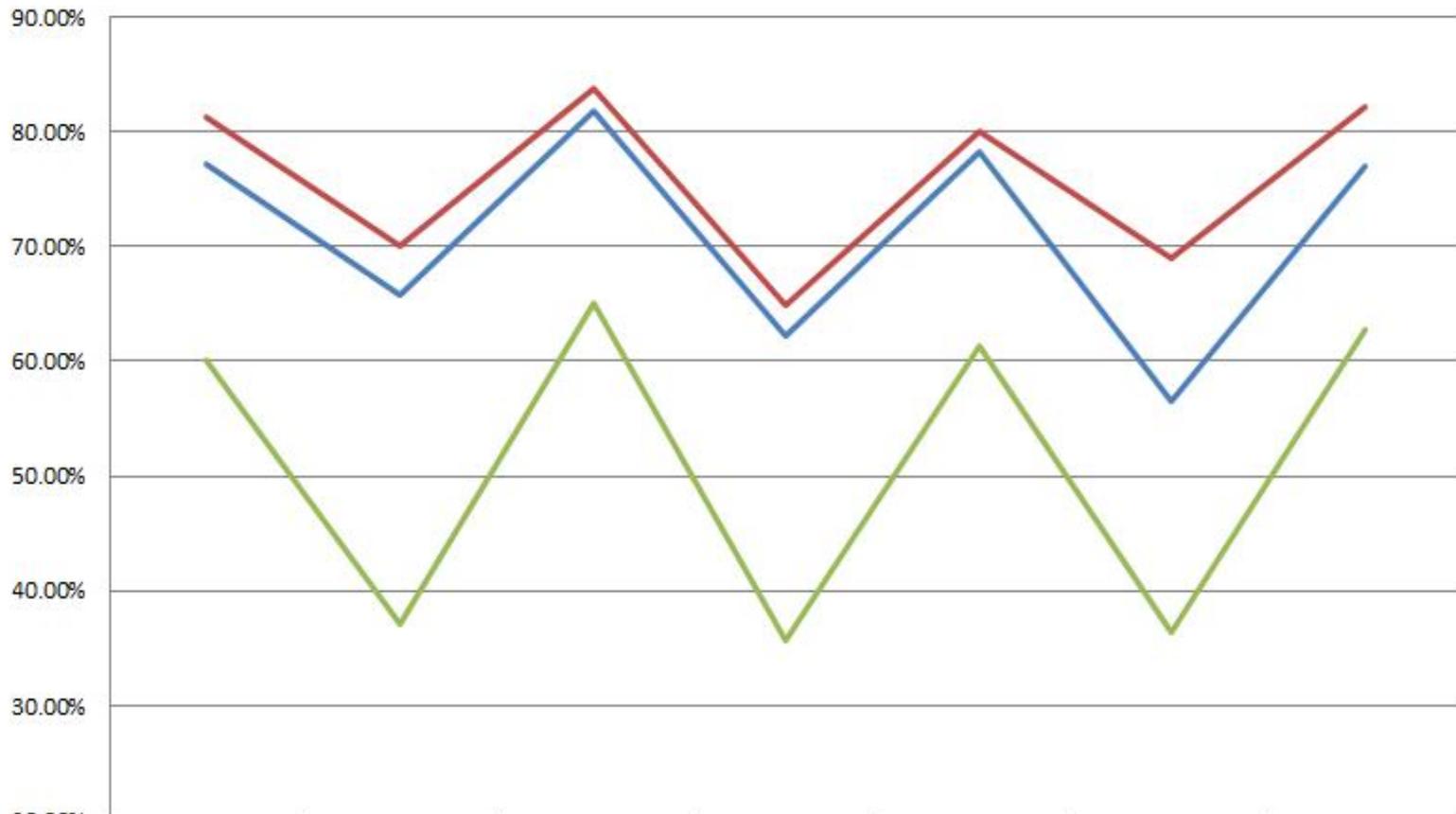


Figure 3: Iowa Voter Turnout Percentage by Party in Election Years Since 2000



	2000	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012
Democrat	77.13%	65.79%	81.82%	62.17%	78.20%	56.48%	76.94%
Republican	81.26%	70.03%	83.77%	64.89%	80.07%	68.98%	82.22%
No Party	60.04%	37.17%	65.08%	35.62%	61.26%	36.41%	62.74%