



# The Florida Senate

Interim Project Report 2008-124

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Committee on Ethics and Elections

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## THE EFFECT OF EARLY VOTING ON VOTER TURNOUT IN FLORIDA ELECTIONS

### SUMMARY

Early voting was fully implemented in Florida in 2004. Over 17% of voters who cast ballots in the last two general elections voted early. While early voting advocates have touted early voting as a way to increase voter turnout, early voting has not had a significant impact on voter turnout in Florida.

### BACKGROUND

#### *History of Early Voting*

While early voting is relatively new in Florida, the idea of an elector casting a ballot in person prior to Election Day is not a new concept. Currently, thirty-one states provide electors with the opportunity to vote in person prior to Election Day.<sup>1</sup> In 1998, the Legislature provided an opportunity for persons casting absentee ballots to do so in person at the supervisor of elections office. This form of early voting was discretionary for each supervisor of elections.<sup>2</sup> Early voting, as we know it today, did not exist until 2004 when the Legislature amended § 101.657, F.S., and introduced a standardized and mandatory process for early voting. This statute took effect on July 1, 2004.<sup>3</sup> Section 101.657, F.S., allows a Florida elector to vote early at the main office of the supervisor of elections or at a branch office if the supervisor's branch office has been a full service facility for at least one year prior to the election. A Florida elector may also vote early at a public library or city hall that has been designated as an early voting site by the supervisor.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>ELECTION REFORM INFORMATION PROJECT, PRE-ELECTION DAY AND ABSENTEE VOTING BY MAIL RULES, last updated on July 26, 2006, *available at* <<http://www.electionline.org/Default.aspx?tabid=474>> (Site accessed on 15 Oct., 2007).

<sup>2</sup> § 101.657, FLA. STAT. (1998).

<sup>3</sup> § 101.657, FLA. STAT. (2004); FLA. DEP'T OF STATE-DIV. OF ELECTIONS, EARLY VOTING, *available at* <<http://election.dos.state.fl.us/earlyvoting.shtml>> (Site accessed on 15 Oct., 2007).

<sup>4</sup> § 101.657, FLA. STAT. (2007).

Currently, early voting begins on the fifteenth day prior to an election and ends the second day before an election. Electors are given eight hours each week day and a total of eight hours each weekend to vote early. The eight hours for early voting on these days must fall between the hours of 7 a.m. and 7 p.m.<sup>5</sup> Persons in line at closing of an early voting site are allowed to vote.<sup>6</sup>

#### *Benefits of Early Voting*

According to a 2004 voting study, 28% of early voters identified convenience as their primary reason for casting an early ballot, while 30% said they wanted to avoid the rush on Election Day.<sup>7</sup> Early voting gives busy people or those with special needs a more convenient opportunity to vote. Many Florida election officials and voting rights advocates have long believed that early voting has a positive impact on voter turnout.<sup>8</sup>

#### *Early Voting Participation in 2004 General Election*

In 2004, Florida had 10,301,290 registered voters.<sup>9</sup> More than seven and a half million Floridians voted in the general election. Over 18% of those casting ballots voted early. The number of voters utilizing early voting

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<sup>5</sup> § 101.657 (1)(d), FLA. STAT. (2007).

<sup>6</sup> § 101.657(1)(c), FLA. STAT. (2007).

<sup>7</sup> DR. MARK S. PRITCHETT AND DR. SUSAN A. MACMANUS, *Florida Voters Rate the 2004 Election*, FLA. DEP'T OF STATE-DIV. OF ELECTIONS, PowerPoint Presentation, slide 14, Jan. 13, 2005, *available at* <<http://election.dos.state.fl.us/ppt/VoterSurvey2004LegislativePresentation.ppt>> (Site accessed on 13 Sept. 2007).

<sup>8</sup> GRONKE, PAUL, BENJAMIN BISHIN, DANIEL STEVENS, and EVA GALANES, *Early Voting in Florida, 2004*, REED COLLEGE EARLY VOTING INFO. CTR. Sept. 1, 2005, pg. 2 *available at* <<http://people.reed.edu/~gronkep/docs/GronkeBishinStevensGalanes-Rosenbaum.APSA.2005.pdf>> (Site accessed on 16 Oct., 2007).

<sup>9</sup> FLA. DEP'T OF STATE-DIV. OF ELECTIONS, COUNTY VOTER REGISTRATION BY PARTY (October 4, 2004), *available at* <<http://election.dos.state.fl.us/voterreg/pdf/2004/2004genParty.pdf>> (Site accessed on 16 Oct., 2007).

differed significantly from county to county. For instance, in Miami-Dade County, 31.3% of electors who voted in the general election cast their ballot early, while only 9.1% of electors who voted in Palm Beach utilized early voting. In Bay County, 24.7% of electors who voted in the general election cast their ballot early, whereas 28% of Indian River County electors voted early.<sup>10</sup> Exit poll data gathered in Miami-Dade County concluded that early voters are generally older electors and that women were more likely to vote early than men. The exit poll study attributed the age and gender findings to the fact early voting provides more opportunities and available times to cast a ballot.<sup>11</sup>

### **Early Voting Participation in 2006 General Election**

In 2006, Florida had over 130,000 additional registered voters than 2004.<sup>12</sup> However, only 47% of registered electors voted in the 2006 general election. This represented a substantial drop from the 74% that participated in the 2004 general election.<sup>13</sup> This difference in turnout can historically be linked to the fact that 2004 was a presidential election year. Over 16% of electors who voted in the 2006 general election voted early.<sup>14</sup> While early voters still comprised a significant percentage of the total vote, these numbers again varied from county to county similar to the 2004 election. For example, only 16% of Miami-Dade electors voted early in the 2006 general election. This was significantly lower than the 31.3% that voted early in the 2004 general election and is likely because 2004 was a presidential election year. However, the percentage of early voters increased in Palm Beach County from 9.1% in the 2004 general election to 16% in the 2006 general election. In Bay County, 27.7% of electors cast early ballots in the 2006 general election,

a slight increase from the 2004 general election. In Indian River County, 23.8% of electors utilized early voting which was a slight decrease from the 2004 general election.<sup>15</sup>

### **Who Voted Early in 2006?**

Forty-one percent of those who voted early in the 2006 general election were registered Republicans and 43.6% were registered Democrats. Electors with either a minor party affiliation or no party affiliation made up the difference with over 15% voting early. Voters casting absentee ballots during the 2006 general election were predominantly Republican with 55.5% voting absentee while only 33.3% of Democrats voted absentee. Electors with either a minor party affiliation or no party affiliation made up the difference with 15.2% voting by absentee ballot. Thus, slightly more Democrats took advantage of early voting, while a more significant number of Republicans took advantage of absentee voting.<sup>16</sup>

Examining the nine counties with the largest populations in Florida, (Brevard, Broward, Dade, Duval, Hillsborough, Lee, Orange, Pinellas, and Palm Beach), this trend continued, with more Democrats utilizing early voting and more Republicans utilizing absentee voting. However, in all other counties with smaller populations, more Republicans utilized both early and absentee voting.<sup>17</sup>

When attempting to reconcile these differences, it should also be noted that statewide there are more registered Democrats in Florida than any other party registration. Furthermore, the nine largest counties collectively have more registered Democrats than any other party. In contrast, however, smaller counties collectively have more registered Republicans than any other party registration.<sup>18</sup>

## **METHODOLOGY**

The Committee's professional staff utilized information compiled and provided by the Division of Elections and supervisors of elections to identify any notable trends regarding early voting and voter turnout.

<sup>10</sup> FLA. DEP'T OF STATE-DIV. OF ELECTIONS, NOVEMBER 2004 GENERAL ELECTION BALLOTS CAST (Feb. 18, 2005), *available at* <<http://election.dos.state.fl.us/pdf/BallotsCast04.pdf>> (Sites accessed 16 Oct., 2007).

<sup>11</sup> Gronke, *supra*, note 8. pgs. 12-13.

<sup>12</sup> FLA. DEP'T OF STATE-DIV. OF ELECTIONS, COUNTY VOTER REGISTRATION BY PARTY (October 10, 2006), *available at* <<http://election.dos.state.fl.us/voterreg/pdf/2006/2006GenParty.pdf>> (Site accessed on 16 Oct., 2007).

<sup>13</sup> FLA. DEP'T OF STATE-DIV. OF ELECTIONS, VOTER TURNOUT PERCENTAGES, *available at* <<http://election.dos.state.fl.us/online/voterpercent.shtml>> (Site accessed on 17 Oct., 2007).

<sup>14</sup> FLA. DEP'T OF STATE-DIV. OF ELECTIONS, 2006 GENERAL ELECTION FACTS, *available at* <<http://election.dos.state.fl.us/reports/06generalElectFacts.shtml>> (Site accessed on 17 Oct., 2007).

<sup>15</sup> FLA. DEP'T OF STATE-DIV. OF ELECTIONS, 2006 GENERAL ELECTION BALLOTS CAST BY COUNTY, *available upon request from the Division of Elections.*

<sup>16</sup> FLA. DEP'T OF STATE-DIV. OF ELECTIONS; AMENDED REPORT ON STATEWIDE VOTER REGISTRATION DATABASE PURSUANT TO § 98.071, F.S., (MARCH 14, 2007); [ELECTRONIC DATA FILE; TABULATED BY LEGISLATIVE STAFF].

<sup>17</sup> *Id.*

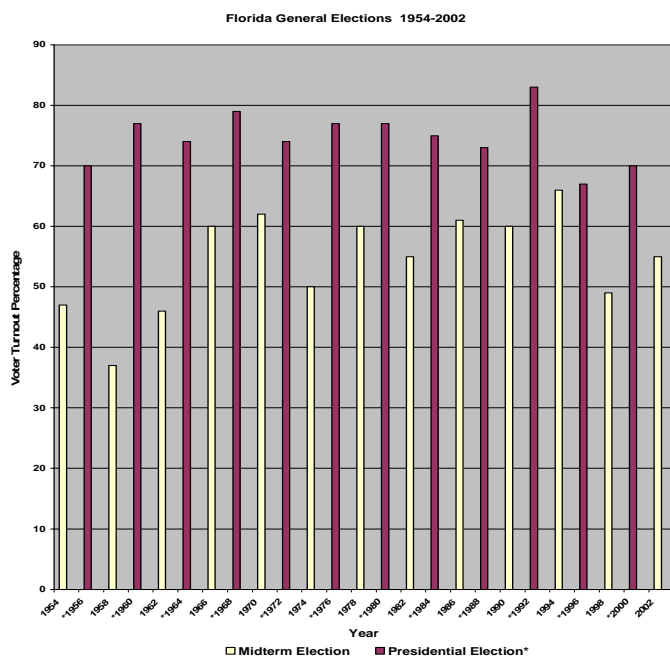
<sup>18</sup> *Id.*

Professional staff also reviewed national studies, academic treatises, media reports, and articles to assess early voting's impact on voter turnout in Florida elections.

## FINDINGS

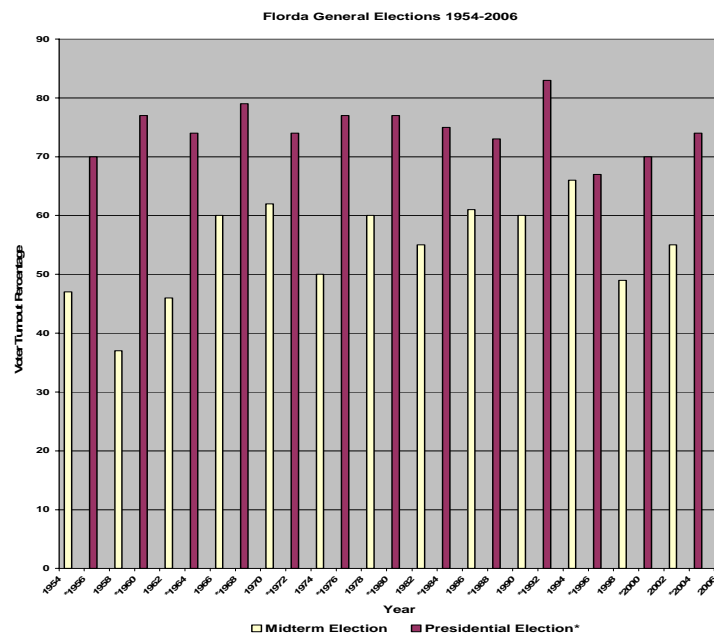
### *Early Voting's Effect on Voter Turnout*

Voter turnout on Election Day for Florida general elections, prior to the mandatory availability of early voting, is illustrated by the graph below. The average Election Day turnout from 1954 to 2002 for a presidential election year was 74.6%. The average Election Day turnout for a mid-term election year was 54.4%.<sup>19</sup>



Source: FLA. DEP'T OF STATE-DIV. OF ELECTIONS, *supra*, note 13.

There have only been two general elections since the advent of mandatory early voting making it difficult to draw empirical conclusions. In the 2004 general election, 74% of all registered electors voted, while 47% of registered electors voted in the 2006 general election.<sup>20</sup> The next graph illustrates voter turnout percentages for the 2004 and 2006 general elections as compared to general election turnout in Florida from 1954 to 2002.



Source: FLA. DEP'T OF STATE-DIV. OF ELECTIONS, *supra*, note 13.

As the graph indicates, there is no significant difference in turnout for the 2004 general election when compared historically with other general elections held in presidential election years. A similar statement can be made regarding the 2006 general election in comparison to turnout for other midterm election years. Since there is no appreciable historical difference in turnout for the 2004 and 2006 general elections when compared to similar elections, it is apparent that early voting has not facially had a significant impact on overall voter turnout.

National academic studies posit differing opinions with regard to early voting's effect upon voter turnout. One study on early voting's effect on voter turnout examined and compared the various forms of early voting (vote by mail, no-excuse absentee voting, and in-person early voting) and concluded that in presidential election years, only vote by mail actually increased voter turnout.<sup>21</sup> The report also found that early voting had only a small impact on voter turnout, explained as the result of the novelty effect accompanying this voting option that historically weakens with the passage of time.<sup>22</sup> In conducting its study analyzing national data from 1980 to 2004, the report concluded early in-person voting (Florida's current system) actually decreased voter turnout.<sup>23</sup> The

<sup>19</sup> FLA. DEP'T OF STATE-DIV. OF ELECTIONS, *supra*, note 13.

<sup>20</sup> *Id.*

<sup>21</sup> Paul Gronke, Eva Galanes-Rosenbaum, Peter A. Miller, *Early Voting and Turnout*, PS: POLITICAL SCIENCE & POLITICS OCT. 2007, VOL. XL, NUM. 4, 639-645, 639.

<sup>22</sup> *Id.* at 642.

<sup>23</sup> *Id.* at 642-643.

study concluded that while early voting has positive attributes, such as more accurate ballot counting, increased voter satisfaction and convenience, early voting does not increase voter turnout.<sup>24</sup>

Another national study by the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate also determined early voting resulted in a reduction in aggregate turnout. In their 2004 study, the Committee compared aggregate turnout percentages between states that utilized early voting, and states that did not. In presidential election years between 1996 and 2000, states employing early voting methods experienced a 2.6% aggregate increase in voter turnout, contrasted with a 2.8% increase in voter turnout in states without early voting. The study examined presidential elections from 1988 to 2000 and found that states utilizing early voting throughout this period saw a 1% decline in overall voter turnout, while non-early voting states experienced a 1.4% increase in voter turnout. As a result of this data, the study concluded that from 1988 to 2000 early voting actually lowered voter turnout instead of enhancing voter participation in elections.<sup>25</sup> However, the same group reported the states that employed early voting in the 2004 presidential election experienced a minimal 1% increase in turnout when compared with states that did not offer early voting.<sup>26</sup>

After reviewing and comparing Florida's brief early voting experience with Florida's voting turnout history, together with national academic studies on early voting's effect on voter turnout, it currently appears that early voting has not significantly increased voter turnout in Florida or other jurisdictions.

### ***Early Voting in 2008***

Voting technology changes may temper the use of early voting in the 2008 general election. In 2007, to create a paper audit trail, the Florida Legislature mandated that all voters cast a marksense ballot (paper ballot) on an optical scan voting system beginning in fall 2008. The

Legislature also permitted the use of ballot-on-demand technology to produce early voting and absentee marksense ballots.

The introduction of this new voting technology will affect counties representing almost two-thirds of Florida's registered voting population. Many supervisors of elections will be using new ballot-on-demand technology to produce the multiple ballot styles needed for early voting sites while other counties will utilize the more labor intensive "pick and pull" early voting method to provide voters with the appropriate ballot style. As a result of these changes, supervisors of elections could be reluctant to expand early voting and may even reduce the number of early voting sites in their counties.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

While convincing arguments to expand early voting have been positively received and favorably acted upon by this committee in the past, the current voting technology evolution in Florida suggests a cautious approach to changes in election administration for 2008.

In the absence of compelling long term evidence linking early voting to significant increased voter turnout in Florida elections, changes to the current early voting scheme in Florida are not recommended at this time.

<sup>24</sup> *Id.* at 642, 644.

<sup>25</sup> COMMITTEE FOR THE STUDY OF THE AMERICAN ELECTORATE, MAKING IT EASIER DOESN'T WORK: NO EXCUSE ABSENTEE AND EARLY VOTING HURT VOTER TURNOUT; CREATE OTHER PROBLEMS 3 (Sept. 13, 2004) available at <[http://www.american.edu/ia/cfer/research/csae\\_09132004.pdf](http://www.american.edu/ia/cfer/research/csae_09132004.pdf)> (Site accessed on 26, Oct. 2007).

<sup>26</sup> COMMITTEE FOR THE STUDY OF THE AMERICAN ELECTORATE, TURNOUT EXCEEDS OPTIMISTIC PREDICTIONS; MORE THAN 122 MILLION VOTE; HIGHEST TURNOUT IN 38 YEARS 5 (Jan. 14, 2005) available at <[http://election04.ssrc.org/research/csae\\_2004\\_final\\_report.pdf](http://election04.ssrc.org/research/csae_2004_final_report.pdf)> (Site accessed on 26, Oct. 2007).