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WHOSE ABSENTEE VOTES ARE COUNTED?

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Abstract

Absentee voting is becoming more prevalent throughout the United States. While there has been some research focused on who votes by absentee ballot, little research has considered another important question about absentee voting: Which absentee ballots are counted, and which are not? Research following the 2000 presidential election has studied the problem of uncounted ballots for precinct voters, but not for absentee voters. To study which absentee ballots are counted we use data from Los Angeles County – the nation's largest and most diverse voting jurisdiction – for the November 2002 general election. We develop three hypotheses regarding the likelihood that various types of ballots will be counted, which we test with our unique absentee voting dataset. We find that uniform service personnel, overseas civilians, and language minority voters have a much higher likelihood that their ballots will not be counted compared with the general absentee voting population. We conclude our paper with a discussion of the implications of our research for the current debates about absentee voting.

Introduction

In recent years there has been a dramatic liberalization of absentee voting laws throughout the United States. For example, in California, before 1978 only registered voters who were ill, disabled, or for other documented reasons could not get to a polling place on election day could vote absentee; after 1978, any registered California voter could vote absentee without a documented cause. In the 1978 California general election, 314,258 absentee votes were cast (4.41% of all votes cast); but by the 2002 general election, 2,096,094 absentee votes were cast (27.09% of all votes cast).[1] Another example is Oregon, widely considered a leader in absentee voting. In 1998, 58% of the votes cast in their general election were absentee ballots, but following the passage of Ballot Measure 60 in 1998, all of Oregon's statewide elections are now conducted by mail. The United States Census Bureau estimated that at least 14% of votes cast in the 2000 presidential election were absentee or early votes.[2]

But absentee voting, especially the liberalization of voting-by-mail, is not without critics. Some have criticized "by demand" absentee voting (in contrast to "by need" absentee voting) because of fears about voter coercion, the lack of privacy, and the potential for fraud (Caltech/MIT Voting Technology Project 2001). Others have criticized absentee voting as a mechanism that undermines civic values and might lead voters to cast less informed ballots, as the early voters do not have access to late-breaking campaign information (Ornstein 2001). There is also a healthy academic debate about whether or not the presence of liberalized absentee voting procedures, like in Oregon, help fuel a long-term increase in voter turnout (Berinsky et al. 2001; Southwell and Burchett 2000a).

A large descriptive literature exists on how absentee voting laws have changed over time and the potential impact of these changes on election outcomes (APSA 1952; Keyssar 2000;

Martin 1945; Ray 1926, 1919, 1918a, 1918b, 1914; Steinbicker 1938; Winther 1944). In recent years, research has focused on the factors that lead to increases in absentee voting (e.g., Dubin and Kalsow 1996a, 1996b; Oliver 1996; Patterson and Caldeira 1985), the impact of absentee voting and other electoral procedures on overall voter participation (e.g., Kim et al. 1975; Oliver 1996; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980) and the impact of having the entire population of a jurisdiction vote absentee – as occurs in Oregon – on overall voter turnout (Berinsky et al. 2001; Karp and Banducci 2000; Southwell and Burchett 2000a, 2000b, 1997). There are also normative arguments regarding whether absentee voting has other broader impacts on civic values and the political process (e.g., Gans 2000; Ornstein 2001).

The research literature tends to focus on a single aspect of the absentee voting process – the actual casting of ballots using the typical absentee voting method, also known as by-mail voting or postal voting. However, as the 2000 general election showed, the decision by the voter to cast an absentee ballot is only one aspect of the voting process. After the ballot is cast, there is a second decision that is made primarily by election officials, who have to determine whether the ballot cast should be counted. For a variety of reasons, many absentee ballots (as well as ballots cast in-person at poll sites on Election Day) are not included in the vote tabulation process. Absentee ballots can be excluded from final tabulation for a variety of reasons: the ballot is returned to the local election official after the deadline for accepting such ballots, the information on the outside of the absentee ballot (which validates its authenticity), is not completed entirely or appears incorrect, the voter's eligibility to cast such a ballot is challenged, or the ballot is spoiled in some way.[3] This second part of the absentee voting process --- the decision whether or not particular absentee ballots are included in final election tabulation --- has been ignored in the research literature. As increasing numbers of ballots are being cast using the absentee

process, it is important to understand how many absentee ballots are not being counted and who is casting these uncounted ballots.

Thus, our research focuses on this unanswered question about absentee voting. Which absentee ballots are counted, and which are not? To answer this question we use data from Los Angeles County – the nation's largest and most diverse voting jurisdiction – for the November 2002 general election to examine both halves of the absentee voting equation. In the next section we discuss the specifics of our absentee voting dataset, and the hypotheses we test. Then we turn to our empirical results, and we conclude with a discussion of the implications of our research for the current debates about absentee voting.

Studying Absentee Voting in Los Angeles County

In the empirical analysis we present below we use the "absentee voter file" (AVF) from Los Angeles County's November 2002 general election. This file has a record for every eligible absentee voter: all permanent absentee voters, all those in vote-by-mail districts, all of the overseas civilians and military personnel voters, and all others who did not cast a ballot in a traditional precinct polling place. The AVF records the process used by each absentee voter to request a ballot; it also records two aspects regarding the resolution of the ballot request: (1) whether the absentee ballot was returned or not, and (2) if it was returned whether it was included in the vote tabulation. The AVF also records basic voter registration and absentee voting information, like party registration, birth-date, and ballot language. We discuss the details of the specific AVF records that are part of our study below.

Los Angeles County, California is the largest and most complex election jurisdiction in the United States. In the November 2002 general election, there were almost 4 million registered

voters in Los Angeles County, and almost 5000 voting precincts. There were almost 1.8 million ballots cast in the November 2002 election, with almost 360,000 of them coming from absentee voters. In Los Angeles County, election officials are required to provide all elections materials in six languages in addition to English: Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Spanish, Tagalog and Vietnamese. This election cost more than $20 million dollars in administrative costs alone.

The sheer size and complexity of election administration in Los Angeles County make it an important case for study. With the large number of absentee voting requests and ballots cast, we have sufficient data to study statistically what in other election jurisdictions might be slivers of the voting population; for an important example, overseas civilian and military personnel. Thus, the sheer size of Los Angeles County's absentee voting population provides us with more statistical power than we could gain by studying other election jurisdictions. Second, the political and social diversity of Los Angeles County provides us the opportunity to study additional questions about absentee voters, especially in our case the relative ease with which non-English speaking citizens can use the absentee voting process.

On the other hand, studying only Los Angeles County has limitations. The most important limitation of our analysis is our focus on one large and urban California county. Thus, given the unique characteristics of Los Angeles County and the specific nature of California's election laws (especially those governing absentee voting), we must be cautious about extrapolating from our results to other election jurisdictions.

Previous Research and Our Hypotheses

One aspect of the absentee voting process that has not been studied in the research literature are the many ways in which citizens (here Californian citizens) can vote outside the

polling place.[4] First, there is the type of absentee voting that is commonly associated with the practice: a registered voter completes an absentee ballot form (provided in their sample ballot, or by third parties like candidates or political organizations) and either sends it to their county election official or drops it off at an election office; these voters receive their ballot later by mail, and either return it in the mail, drop it off in person at an election office or at a polling place on election day, or have an authorized third party return it for them.

Second, there are permanent absentee voters. After registered voters request this status, they automatically receive absentee ballots in the mail; as long as they return their ballot in all statewide elections they retain their permanent absentee voter status. Also, voters who obtain a court order showing necessary cause for their registration information to be kept confidential are categorized as a type of permanent absentee voter until the election official is informed that it is no longer necessary to keep the voter's identification confidential.[5] Last, under certain conditions voters can be required to vote by mail, at the discretion of the local election official: if the voter's election precinct has fewer that 250 registered voters on the 88th day before an election, the precinct can be declared a "mail ballot precinct" and all voters in the precinct are automatically sent absentee ballots.

Third, overseas citizens and military personnel, formally covered by the "Uniformed Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act" (recently updated by the National Defense Authorization Act of 2002 and the Help America Vote Act of 2002), have an expedited and simplified registration and absentee ballot request process. These citizens can use the "Federal Postcard Application," which simultaneously serves as a voter registration and absentee ballot request, thus simplifying the process for this group. Also, citizens in this same group can request "special absentee voter" status; which, because of their location or duties makes it impossible for

them to vote absentee during the required period. "Special absentee voters" receive their ballot approximately 60 days before the election; all other requests for absentee ballots made more than 29 days before the election are not processed until the 29th day before the election.

A final category of absentee voters in California are those who because of illness, disability, or physical handicap are unable to vote at a precinct polling place and who have missed the application deadline for requesting an absentee ballot.[6] These citizens can request an absentee ballot in writing which can be provided to an authorized representative of the citizen who presents the written application to an election official. The voter, or their authorized representative, can return the absentee ballot to an election official or to any polling place in the election jurisdiction.

These various categories of absentee voting – which exist alongside poll site voting in all states but Oregon – shows how voters make a series of choices about whether they want to vote and how they want to vote. Research on absentee voting has traditionally focused on the behavioral decision by registered voters whether to cast their ballot in the polling place or by some absentee method, and has focused on the relative differences between absentee voters, precinct voters, and non-voters, usually employing survey data. There has been little attention focused on the different types of absentee voters or on the important political question of whose absentee ballots are returned and then counted.

The latter is a critical question, highlighted by studies of voting in the wake of the 2000 presidential election (e.g., Alvarez and Sinclair 2004; Caltech/MIT 2001; Tomz and Van Houweling 2003). Despite conventional wisdom, casting an absentee ballot is not the same as casting a vote at the polls as the voter does not place their ballot in a box or in the memory of an

electronic voting machine. Instead, they mail their ballot or deliver it to an election official, and are rarely certain how the ballot is adjudicated.

Absentee ballots can be challenged and not counted in the certified results for a variety of reasons. The most likely reason why a ballot is rejected is that it is received after the close of the polls. For example, in California absentee ballots have to be received by the election official by the close of the polls on Election Day. However, even if a ballot is received in time, it can be challenged for other reasons. When the election official receives a ballot, all of the information on the outside of the ballot that authenticates the ballot is examined. A voter is required to sign the ballot envelope and provide other information, such as their address. If the signature does not match or is missing, or the other information does not match what is on file, the ballot is also rejected.[7]

Voting for certain absentee populations is also more difficult. Recent studies by the US General Accounting Office (2001) show that casting a meaningful absentee vote can be very difficult for individuals who are UOCAVA voters. One key problem is ballot transit time; a 2001 GAO study found that transit times for first class mail can range from as little as five days to as much as a month (GAO 2001). Additionally, all voters – including UOCAVA voters – make errors in completing the forms required for an absentee ballot request. As the GAO noted,

> [M]ilitary and overseas voters do not always complete absentee voting
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> requirements or use federal forms correctly. The basic steps that absentee voters
>
> must take to register and request an absentee ballot are similar for all states.
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> Nevertheless, absentee voting schedules and requirements vary from state to state.
>
> In addition, counties vary in how they interpret and implement state
>
> requirements... varying state and county requirements resulted in confusion

among voters about residency requirements and about the deadlines for registering to vote, requesting a ballot, and returning the voted ballot. County officials said that problems in processing absentee voting applications arise primarily because voters do not fill in the forms correctly or do not begin the voting process early enough to complete the multiple steps they must take (GAO 2001, pages 40-41).

In a recent significant study, similar to ours, by Imai and King (2002) examined late overseas absentee ballots received in the 2000 Florida election after November 7, 2000, which county canvassing boards deliberated over between November 17 and November 26.[8] Imai and King (2002) examined 3739 overseas ballots, of which 2490 where accepted and counted by canvassing boards; thus, 33% of the overseas ballots received in Florida after November 7, 2000 were invalidated for various.

Importantly, Imai and King (2002) studied the 2490 overseas absentee ballots received after November 7, 2000, which were accepted by canvassing boards and included in their county tabulations. Based on their understanding of the Florida regulations for what constitutes an acceptable overseas absentee ballot, they found that 680 (27%) of the accepted overseas absentee ballots were flawed. Had these 680 ballots not been accepted, then 52% of the late overseas absentee ballots would have been rejected in the 2000 Florida election.

The most common flaw found in these ballots was that many had no visible proof of having been mailed by Election Day. Under Florida law, overseas absentee ballots in the 2000 election needed an indication (like a postmark or dated signature) to demonstrate it was mailed before November 7, 2000; 756 ballots did not, and 344 of the counted ballots had this problem. The second type of flaw involved ballots that did not have a witness signature or the witness's

complete address; 527 ballots had this flaw, and 96 of the counted ballots were flawed in this way.

The third most significant flaw in the late overseas absentee ballots was that 327 were received after November 7, 2000 with a domestic postmark, and 183 of these ballots were counted; Florida law states that absentee ballots that are mailed from within the United States or territories must be received before November 7, 2000. Next, in Florida overseas absentee voters can submit two ballots, and only the second ballots is to be counted; the researchers found 19 instances where both ballots were counted. Last, 69 ballots were received after November 17, 2000 which was the last day overseas absentee ballots could be received (10 days after the election), and 5 of these ballots were counted. From Imai and King's examination of the late overseas absentee ballots from Florida, we see that these ballots contained an extremely high number of errors. Many voters cast ballots that probably should have been rejected.

The Imai and King (2002) study is significant substantively, as it documents major problems with the absentee voting process for this one category of absentee voters. Overseas citizens and military personnel can, just because of the vagaries of both overseas and domestic mail systems, think they voted when in fact their ballot was not counted. Their study is methodologically important as well, because they analyze the actual absentee ballots themselves, and thus know which ballots were counted and which were not. Unfortunately, beyond the Imai and King study, little is known about the resolution of absentee ballots more generally, and about overseas citizen and military absentee ballots specifically. The only attempt at a national study was conducted in 2001 by the GAO, and they prefaced their study by noting that "many counties could not provide data on how many absentee ballots they had received from military and overseas voters covered under the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act and

how many of these ballots they had disqualified" (GAO 2001, page 52). Based on partial data, the GAO estimated that 8.1% of military and overseas absentee ballots were disqualified in 2000 in small counties, relative to a disqualification rate of 1.8% for other absentee voters.[9]

There are other voting populations that are vulnerable to problems with the absentee voting process. In Los Angeles County, there are six language minorities – Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Spanish, Tagalog, and Vietnamese – and under the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and its amendments, the County is required to serve these voters in their native language. However, many of these voters also are not used to participating in democratic elections and, even with the outreach efforts of the County and groups assisting language minority voting populations, many find the absentee voting process difficult to navigate. In fact, one of the most common reasons why voters contact the Korean American Coalition's election hotline is to learn more about the election and the general aspects of the voting process (Hall 2002; Hall forthcoming).

There is research that has studied the political participation by non-foreign born and by non-English proficient citizens. In particular, language proficiency has been shown to be a critical predictor of participation in recent research (e.g., Citrin and Highton 2002, Tam Cho 1999).[1] A lack of English proficiency can clearly make the process of voting --- and in particular absentee voting --- more costly and complicated for a citizen (Downs 1957, Tam Cho 1999). This is especially true in the absentee voting process, since biliterate skill development tends to develop slower than bilingual skill development among language minorities. Asian language minorities—of which there are five in Los Angeles County—have an especially difficult time developing biliterate skills because almost all have non-Roman alphabetic writing systems (Loo 1985). This leads us to expect that registered voters who lack English proficiency will also have

difficulty navigating the absentee voting process, and that they will be less likely to return their absentee ballots and to have their ballots counted.

Thus, based on the previous studies on absentee voting, we have three hypotheses that we test in this paper. First, we expect that overseas voters will be less likely to return their absentee ballots, but will be more likely to have their ballots challenged upon return. This hypothesis is based on the results found in the GAO report (2001) and Imai and King (2002). Second, we also expect to find that voters who use a non-English ballot will be less likely to return their ballots and will be more likely to have their ballot challenged upon return. We base this hypothesis on the special problems this class of voters faces regarding the basic accessibility of the electoral process, and on past research (Tam Cho 1999) that demonstrates that language proficiency is an important predictor of political participation. Last, we expect to find that absentee voters who have applied for an absentee ballot specifically in this election, relative to those who are permanent absentee voters or are in vote-by-mail precincts, will be more likely to return their absentee ballots. This hypothesis is based on the assumption that registered voters who have taken the active step of requesting a ballot for the current election are likely to be more interested in the election and hence more motivated to cast their ballot. We test these hypotheses below using both bivariate and multivariate statistical techniques.

Empirical Results

We begin our analyses of our hypotheses with a presentation of descriptive statistics that summarize the absentee voter file from the 2002 November elections in Los Angeles County. We then turn to some bivariate presentations of the data that provide preliminary tests of our hypotheses. We finally present the results from two binary logit analyses where we subject our hypotheses to a controlled test.

In Table 1 we provide descriptive statistics regarding the relative frequencies of each type of absentee voter. "Sample Ballot" absentee voters are ones who applied for their absentee ballot using the form provided in their sample ballot materials that were mailed to their registration address. These absentee voters make up the largest group, at just over 40% of the absentee voter file. "Permanent" absentee voters are those who have requested that absentee voting status. In the 2002 general elections, these voters made up almost 33% of those in the absentee voting file. Next were those in the "Apply by Mail" category; these registered voters requested an absentee ballot using some application (most likely provided by a political campaign, party, or interest group), and comprise 22.46% of those in the absentee voter file.

Table 1 Goes Here

These three types of absentee voters make up almost 96% of the absentee voter file in this election in Los Angeles County. The remaining 4% are almost entirely those who have been classified as "Vote by Mail" voters, who have requested an absentee ballot in person ("Walk-in" absentee voters, who are 0.29% of the absentee voter requests), who are "Overseas" (0.28%), or who requested an absentee ballot due to their inability to get to a polling place because of hospitalization or other infirmity (the "Hospital" classification, 0.14% of absentee voters).

The absentee voter file also contained other valuable information about each individual registered voter: whether they asked for their absentee ballot in English or another available language; the party they registered with (here coded as Democratic, Republican, Third Party, or Decline-To-State [DTS]); and their birth-date, which we coded into five age categories.

Table 2 Goes Here

In Table 2 we provide the basic descriptive statistics for the registered voters in the absentee voter file. The overwhelming tendency of absentee voters was to request an English ballot – only 3.33% of those in the absentee voter file requested a non-English ballot. The partisan registration of voters in this election who requested an absentee ballot was mainly Democratic (about 54%); Republicans were a third of the file (34%). Only 2.4% of the absentee voters were third party registrants, while over 10% recorded no party affiliation when they registered. The age distribution of the absentee voters in Table 2 documents a clear skew towards the older age categories. Only 19% of the youngest voters (18 to 25) requested absentee ballots, and a scant 8% of the 26 to 35 year old voters did as well. But 25% of those 51 to 65 requested absentee ballots, as did an identical percentage of those over the age of 65.

We continue looking at the basic attributes of absentee voters by considering the way in which they requested an absentee ballot. In Table 3, we present two panels of information: the top panel provides ballot request breakdowns for language use and partisanship, and the bottom panel provides the same breakdowns for the age distributions. Of the 15,788 absentee voters who requested a non-English ballot, almost 41% did so using the form provided in their sample ballot. Additionally, 35% of the non-English registered voters in the absentee voter file are permanent absentee voters, while another 21% applied by mail.

Table 3 Goes Here

In terms of partisanship, there were 255,417 voters in the absentee voter file with a Democratic party affiliation. Democratic absentee voters were roughly one-third permanent absentee voters, and another third used their sample ballot application. Almost 29% of Democratic absentee voters applied by mail. Republican absentee voters were much more likely to use the sample ballot application (48%), and almost one-third of Republican absentee voters

14

were permanently registered as absentee. Many fewer Republicans than Democrats applied by mail. Decline-To-State and third party absentee voters demonstrate a profile much like Republicans: 47% used the sample ballot application, one-third were permanent absentee voters, and about 13% applied by mail. However, both decline-to-state and third party absentee voters were about twice as likely to be in vote-by-mail precincts or to be overseas absentee voters.

The bottom panel of Table 3 gives the same ballot request breakdowns by age. Of younger voters (19-25 years of age), almost 40% used the sample ballot to get their absentee ballot, 21% applied by mail, and 36% were permanent absentee voters. As we move to examine the next three age groups, we see that the use of the sample ballot application increases for 26-65 year olds, as does the use of general absentee ballot request by mail. The 26 to 65 year old voters are less likely to be permanent absentee voters. Absentee voters over 65 are very likely to be permanent absentee voters (46%) and are less likely to have used the sample ballot or other by-mail means to get their absentee ballot.

Next, we turn to the question of absentee ballot resolution. For every individual in the November 2002 absentee voter file we know (1) whether the individual returned their ballot, and (2) if they returned their ballot, whether it was challenged or counted. We give the simple statistics for the entire absentee voter population in Table 4.

Table 4 Goes Here

In this particular election, almost one-quarter (23.93%) of the absentee ballots requested were not returned by voters. 72% of the absentee ballots were returned and included in the final tabulation of the vote. An additional 4% of absentee ballots were returned, but challenged. When we recomputed the statistics of all returned absentee ballots, looking at the fraction that were counted or challenged, we find that 95% of returned ballots were not challenged. However,

more than 20,000 ballots were challenged, and the way in which these ballots were adjudicated could have had a significant impact on many races.

The next two tables provide descriptive information regarding whether individual ballots are returned and are counted, based on ballot request mechanisms and voter characteristics. In Table 5, we give the ballot resolution statistics for the eight different types of absentee voters. This Table shows the percentages for each type of absentee voter who (1) did not return their ballot, (2) returned their ballot and their ballot was counted, and (3) returned their ballot but it was challenged and not included in the vote tabulation. The categories of absentee voters who were less likely to return their ballot were those in vote-by-mail precincts (58%), overseas voters (47%), and permanent absentee voters (34%). On the other hand, absentee votes coming from citizens who are hospitalized are very likely to return their ballots (only 2% did not return their ballot), as are those who requested an absentee ballot in person (9% did not return) or by using the sample ballot (14% did not return their ballot).

Table 5 Goes Here

Table 5 also shows the rates at which absentee ballots are challenged, if returned. Overseas voters are the most likely to have their absentee ballot challenged, with almost 10% of their ballots challenged and not counted. Those in vote-by-mail precincts also have high challenge rates (8%). At the other end of the distribution are walk-in and sample ballot absentee voters, with about 2% of each of their returned ballots challenged.

In Table 6, we present ballot resolution rates for the variables we have for each citizen in the absentee voter file: language, partisanship and age. Again, we look first at ballot returns and then at whether the ballot is returned. Beginning with ballot language, we see that non-English absentee voters are slightly more likely to not return their ballot, and marginally more likely to

have their ballot challenged if returned. Amongst the partisan groupings used in Table 6, about one-third of third party or decline-to-state absentee voters did not return their absentee ballots, between 5 and 10 percentage points higher than for either Democrats or Republicans. Furthermore, third party and decline-to-state voters are marginally more likely to have their absentee ballots challenged and not included in the tabulation than are Democrats or Republicans. When we look at absentee voting by age categories in the bottom panel of Table 6, we see that 25 to 35 and 36 to 50 year olds are more likely to not return their absentee ballots than very young (18-25 year old) or older (both 51-65 and older than 65) absentee voters. On the other hand, we also see that 25-35 year old, and 36-50 year old absentee voters are marginally more likely to have their absentee vote challenged if they do return their ballot.

Table 6 Goes Here

Thus far we have only examined relatively simple bivariate statistical results. We cannot say with much certainty whether some absentee voter types are more or less likely to return their absentee ballots (for example) than others without using a multivariate statistical analysis. We now turn to a multivariate logit analysis to better examine our hypotheses. We are interested in modeling the two-part process we have been calling ballot resolution: (1) whether an individual returns their absentee ballot or not, and then (2) whether the returned ballot is challenged or counted. Our approach here is to examine each component of this ballot resolution process independently. That is, we first specify and estimate a logit model with a dependent variable of whether or not each voter returns the absentee ballot. We then estimate the second logit model: conditional on ballot return, was the absentee ballot counted?[11]

In our first logit model (ballot return) we code the dependent variable 1 if the absentee ballot was returned by the voter, and 0 otherwise. In the second logit analysis, we code the

dependent variable 1 when the returned absentee ballot was challenged, 0 when the returned absentee ballot was not challenged. We include indicator variables for the various types of absentee voters: UOCAVA, Sample Ballot, In-person, Hospital, and Permanent absentee voters. We also include an indicator variable for whether or not the absentee voter requested an English language ballot, for partisanship (Democrat, Republican, and Decline-to-state), and for the voter's age.

Table 7 shows the logit analysis of absentee ballot return. The Table is organized with each independent variable in a row, followed by the estimated model coefficient, the estimated standard error, and the estimated first difference.[12] We concentrate our discussion on the estimated first differences in the last column of the Table. For each type of absentee voter, we obtain statistically significant estimates, with the strongest effects estimated for Hospital, In-person, and UOCAVA absentee voters. For the first two types of absentee voters we see a relatively strong (0.28 and 0.20) and positive estimated effect: if the absentee voter is either a Hospital or In-person voter, they are more likely to return their ballot than are the other types of absentee voters, holding all other variables in the model constant. However, for UOCAVA voters the estimate is negative, which means that UOCAVA voters are 0.18 less likely to return their ballot, all other variables held constant, than the other types of absentee voters.

Table 7 Goes Here

Next, we find that absentee voters who request an English language ballot are 0.05 more likely to return their ballot, all other variables held constant. Of course, this means that those requesting a non-English ballot are 0.05 less likely to return their absentee ballot. Democrats and Republicans are also both statistically more likely to return their ballot than are third party voters (as the latter is the excluded or comparison category in this logit specification). Decline-

To-State voters are insignificantly different in their ballot return likelihood, relative to third-party absentee voters.

Finally, Table 7 provides the first difference estimates for the various age groups, relative to absentee voters over the age of 65. We find that, holding the other variables in the model constant, those in the 26 to 35 age category are the least likely to return their absentee ballots. Next in terms of likelihood of absentee ballot return are the 36 to 50 year olds, followed by the 18 to 25 year olds. Our results show that 51 to 65 year olds are only slightly (but statistically significantly) less likely that the 65 or older absentee voters to return their ballots.

Table 8 contains the logit results for our second analysis: whether the absentee ballot is challenged or counted, given that the voter returns it. The results in Table 8 are presented in the same format as in the preceding table, and again we focus on the first difference estimates.[13] Here, we see that UOCAVA voters are by far the most likely to have their absentee ballots challenged (and not counted) if they are returned. With the other variables in the model held constant, UOCAVA voters are 0.06 more likely to have their ballot challenged. We estimate that Sample Ballot and In-person absentee voters are statistically less likely to have their ballots challenged, while Permanent absentee voters are slightly (but statistically significantly) more likely to have their ballots challenged if returned.

<div align="center">Table 8 Goes Here</div>

Moving to the voter characteristics, we see that those using an English-language ballot are statistically less likely to have their ballot challenged if returned; again, this result implies that those using non-English language ballots are more likely to see their ballot challenged when returned. The partisanship variables indicate that third-party voters are more likely to have their ballots challenged, holding the other factors in the model constant. We find that Democrats,

Republicans, and Decline-To-State absentee voters are less likely to have their ballots challenged than third-party voters, but only by a very slight, yet significant, margin (each 0.01).

Finally, for the estimates of ballot challenge for the various age groups, we see that absentee voters in the 26 to 35 age group are the most likely to have their absentee ballots challenged, twice as likely as those in the 36 to 50 age group. 18 to 25 year olds are slightly more likely than those older than 65 to have their absentee ballots challenged.

Conclusions

Increasing numbers of Americans are turning to absentee voting, especially voting by mail. Absentee voting is undoubtedly a more convenient way for many citizens to participate in the electoral process, and election administrators increasingly favor it because it reduces the number of citizens using traditional polling places to vote. There have been a number of studies that have looked at the recent rise in absentee voting. This literature has focused on the impact of voting by mail, either by looking at the effects that absentee voting has on voter turnout or the effects it has on the composition of the electorate. Our study is different, as we have a unique dataset that allows us to study whether absentee votes were counted.

We see a series of important implications of our research. The first step in the absentee voting process is the return of the ballot. We found that overseas citizens, permanent absentees, and those citizens who requested a non-English ballot were substantially less likely to return their absentee ballot. In particular, that overseas citizens and non-English speaking voters are less likely to return their ballots indicates that these two groups of absentee voters potentially face significant hurdles as they attempt to participate in the political process. While we do not have information in our dataset that will allow us to better understand why these two groups of

voters are less likely to return their ballots, we speculate that the overseas voters are undoubtedly facing the sorts of difficulties highlighted in studies following the 2000 presidential election: the significant amount of time that it can take for voting materials to be mailed and to be returned. Language minority voters, by contrast, may find casting their absentee ballot difficult because of lack of a understanding of the balloting process.

The second step, whether or not an absentee ballot gets counted once it is returned by the voter, also produced an intriguing result. We found that overseas voters were substantially more likely to have their absentee ballot challenged and not counted than other types of absentee voters; our specific result indicated that an overseas citizen who returned their absentee ballot was six times more likely to have their ballot challenged and not counted relative to our comparison category of absentee voters who applied by mail. Again, we do not have specific information about why overseas absentee ballots were more likely to be challenged, although we speculate that they are challenged because they are coming in after the official deadline in California – the close of polling on Election Day. The GAO study (2001) found that, in counties that provided disqualified ballot data for military and overseas citizens, approximately 40% of the disqualified ballots arrived after the legal deadline for absentee voting. It is also likely that overseas absentee ballots are being challenged due to other defects, like missing information on the return envelope. Language minority voters may also be making errors on their absentee ballot return envelope that result in the ballot being challenged. Unfortunately, the database we were provided does not provide any indication as to why ballots were challenged.[14]

Obviously, we must be cautious in generalizing our results in this paper as we are only studying one election in one California county. It will be interesting to study other elections in Los Angeles County, as well as other states and counties, using the actual absentee voter files.

These databases provide a wealth of important information, especially concerning the administrative issues of who returns their absentee ballots and whose absentee ballots are counted.

The 2000 presidential election generated enormous interest in the basic questions of election administration in the United States. Most of these studies, like the Caltech/MIT study that estimated that as many as 6 million votes were "lost" in that election, have studied polling place and voting system problems. As increasing numbers of Americans participate using the absentee voting process, we clearly need to better understand how the absentee voting process works, who uses it, and what problems certain types of voters might encounter as they attempt to participate using the absentee voting process.

Notes

[1] For a more detailed discussion of the early changes in California's absentee voting procedures and their impact see Patterson and Caldeira (1985).

[2] We say "as many as" because the Census estimate does not include overseas citizens or military personnel overseas. In addition to universal absentee voting in Oregon, the use of absentee balloting was high in Washington (52%); Colorado, Nevada and Arizona (roughly 35%); and New Mexico and California (22%). See U.S. Census Bureau (2002).

[3] Ballots that are not included in vote tabulation are sometimes called "disqualified" ballots (GAO 2001). Excluded or disqualified ballots are not included in their entirety in vote tabulation; this is in contrast to "residual votes", which are ballots on which no votes are counted for specific races because the voter did not make a discernable indication of preference ("undervotes"), or make more indications of preference than allowed ("overvotes"). For studies of the latter "uncounted" votes, see Alvarez and Sinclair (2004), Ansolabehere (2002), and Tomz and Van Houweling (2003).

[4] See "A Guide To Absentee Voting in California, 2001", California Secretary of State, Elections Division, http://www.ss.ca.gov/elections/Outreach/absentee/links/absgde_long.pdf for additional details about absentee voting in California.

[5] This is special class of absentee voters is covered in California Election Code Section 2166, which reads in part (Section 2166(a)): "Any person filing with the county elections official a

new affidavit of registration or reregistration may have the information relating to his or her residence address, telephone number, and e-mail address appearing on the affidavit, or any list or roster or index prepared therefrom, declared confidential upon order of a superior court issued upon a showing of good cause that a life threatening circumstance exists to the voter or a member of the voter's household …" (Section 2166(a)). Such registered voters will "Be considered an absent voter for all subsequent elections or until the county election official is notified otherwise by the court or in writing by the voter" (Section 2166(b)(1)).

[6] In the 2002 general election there was another category of absentee voters: those who voted in a special pre-election period, in person, using electronic touchscreen voting systems. This was the result of a special pilot project in Los Angeles County; we consider these as early voters, and they are not included in our analysis below. For research on early voting, see Stein and Garcia-Monet (1997) and Stein (1998).

[7] See Hall (2002) for a detailed discussion of the ballot reconciliation and certification process used in Los Angeles.

[8] David Barstow and Don Van Natta, Jr., "How Bush Took Florida: Mining the Overseas Absentee Vote", *New York Times*, Sunday, July 15, 2001, page 1. These data were also examined in an unpublished study by Kosuke Imai and Gary King, "Did Illegally Counted Absentee Ballots Decide the 2000 U.S. Presidential Election?", January 2002, Harvard University, manuscript.

[9] GAO 2001, page 54. The GAO was unable to provide a national estimate for military and overseas absentee ballot disqualification rates for the larger counties due to unavailability of necessary information from such counties.

[10] Lien (1994) indirectly studied language use in the home for Asian- and Mexican-Americans and the impact it had on a variety of political participation measures, as in his analysis language use in the home was one of four measures that were collapsed into a single variable called "ethnic ties". In his analysis, he finds that "ethnic ties" do not impact voter turnout for either Asian- or Mexican-Americans; additionally, "ethnic ties" do not impact non-voting participatory activities for Asian-Americans, but stronger "ethnic ties" has a negative and statistically significant impact on non-voting participatory activities for Mexican-Americans.

[11] This process could also be modeled with a conditional logit model. However, the sheer size of the absentee voter file we are using prevented use from easily estimating either a conditional logit model or a generalized-extreme value logit model. An alternative estimation strategy we attempted was to select random subsamples of the absentee voter file and then to estimate conditional logit or general-extreme value logit models on the subsamples (with the intention of then averaging across multiple estimations on multiple subsamples); the problem here was that some of the absentee voter types, like UOCAVA voters, that are of great interest to use occur with so little frequency in the full absentee voter file that they are poorly represented in small subsamples of the dataset.

[12] The first differences were estimated using the *Clarify* package in STATA (Tomz et al. 2003; King et al. 2000). We estimated the first differences by first computing a baseline where all the independent variables were set to their minimum value (here 0). Then we re-estimated the probability that the absentee ballot would be returned (or challenged if returned) after changing the value of the respective independent variable to the maximum value (here 1). We report the difference between the two probability estimates; starred entries are those where the estimated 95% confidence interval does not include zero.

[13] The first difference estimates are based on the same combination of values of our independent variables discussed above in note 12.

[14] The absentee voting file from the 2002 November election does have a field that indicates the date of ballot return. 90.5% of the challenged UOCAVA absentee ballots arrived after the legal deadline for absentee voting. However, there are some apparent inaccuracies with data entered into this field, as it appears that there are 1114 absentee ballots with return dates after the close of election that were returned and not challenged. Discussions with Los Angeles County Registar-Recorder staff indicated that this discrepancy arises from inaccuracies in data entry.

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Table 1: Types of Absentee Voters

Sample Ballot	40.26
Permanent	32.98
Apply by Mail	22.46
Vote by Mail	3.59
Walk-in	0.29
Overseas	0.28
Hospital	0.14
Other	0.00
TOTAL	100.00
N	473,831

Table 2: Some Characteristics of Absentee Voters

	Absentee Voters
Language	
English	96.67
Non-English	3.33
Party Registration	
Democratic	53.90
Republican	33.56
Third Party	2.42
DTS	10.12
Age	
18-25	19.27
25-35	8.06
35-50	22.14
50-65	24.68
>65	25.25

Table 3: Characteristics of Different Absentee Voter Types

	Language	Partisanship			
	Non-English	Democratic	Republican	DTS	Third Party
Sample Ballot	40.67	33.60	48.22	47.10	49.56
Permanent	34.71	33.62	32.43	32.14	29.76
Apply by Mail	20.59	28.61	15.81	13.95	13.13
Vote by Mail	3.38	3.46	2.91	5.87	6.57
Walk-in	0.57	0.31	0.27	0.25	0.35
Overseas	0.03	0.24	0.23	0.58	0.44
Hospital	0.04	0.16	0.12	0.11	0.20
Other	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
N	15,788	255,417	158,999	47,949	11,466
	Age				
	18-25	**25-35**	**35-50**	**50-65**	**>65**
Sample Ballot	39.52	40.23	43.65	43.75	34.32
Permanent	35.86	20.71	24.09	29.58	45.94
Apply by Mail	20.78	30.52	26.70	22.80	16.86
Vote by Mail	3.07	7.46	4.82	3.24	1.93
Walk-in	0.29	0.30	0.31	0.33	0.22
Overseas	0.36	0.68	0.33	0.19	0.48
Hospital	0.12	0.10	0.10	0.10	0.25
Other	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
N	91,290	41,044	104,920	116,931	120,086

Table 4: Absentee Ballot Resolution

Not Returned	23.93
Returned and Not Challenged	72.31
Returned and Challenged	3.77
N	473,831

Table 5: Absentee Voter Types and Ballot Resolution

	Not Returned	Returned		
		Not Challenged	Challenged	*N*
Sample Ballot	13.76	83.67	2.57	190,757
Permanent	33.83	61.47	4.69	156,268
Apply by Mail	22.12	74.12	3.76	106,410
Vote by Mail	58.35	33.27	8.38	17,032
Walk-in	9.05	88.61	2.34	1,370
Overseas	47.38	42.98	9.64	1,317
Hospital	2.25	93.56	4.19	668
Other	22.22	77.78	0.00	9
N	113,365	342,608	17,858	473,831

Table 6: Absentee Voter Characteristics and Ballot Resolution

	Not Returned	Returned		
		Not Challenged	Challenged	*N*
Language				
English	23.82	72.43	3.76	458,043
Non-English	27.10	68.76	4.14	15,788
Party Registration				
Democratic	24.66	71.50	3.84	255,417
Republican	20.24	76.25	3.51	158,999
Third Party	29.79	65.63	4.58	11,466
DTS	30.83	65.11	4.06	47,949
Age				
18-25	23.02	73.29	3.69	91,290
25-35	36.10	59.28	4.61	41,044
35-50	27.51	68.47	4.02	104,920
50-65	20.42	76.11	3.47	116,931
>65	20.72	75.68	3.61	119,646

Table 7: Ballot Return: Logit Analysis

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	First Difference
UOCAVA	-.78	.06	-.18*
Sample Ballot	.81	.01	.14*
In-person	1.31	.09	.20*
Hospital	2.67	.26	.28*
Permanent	-.45	.01	-.10*
English Ballot	.23	.02	.05*
Democrat	.32	.02	.06*
Republican	.46	.02	.09*
Decline-to-state	-.03	.02	-.005
18-25	-.25	.01	-.06*
25-35	-.95	.01	-.23*
35-50	-.55	.01	-.13*
50-65	-.12	.01	-.03*
Constant	.81	.03	
Note: Dependent variable is coded 1 if the absentee ballot was returned by the voter, 0 otherwise. All variables but Decline-to-state had coefficients significantly significant at the $p<.05$ level. The baseline probability, with all variables set to 0, of ballot return was 0.69 (standard error .006); the first differences reported here reflect the change from this baseline probability estimated from changing the respective variable to 1, and holding all others constant at 0. First differences that are significant at the $p<.05$ level are indicated by *.			

Table 8: Ballot Challenge: Logit Analysis

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	First Difference
UOCAVA	.80	.09	.06*
Sample Ballot	-.55	.02	-.02*
In-person	-.65	.18	-.03*
Hospital	-.01	.19	-.00
Permanent	.10	.02	.01*
English Ballot	-.13	.04	-.01*
Democrat	-.24	.05	-.01*
Republican	.25	.05	-.01*
Decline-to-state	-.14	.05	-.01*
18-25	.07	.02	.004*
25-35	.30	.03	.02*
35-50	.18	.02	.01*
50-65	.02	.02	.00
Constant	-2.84	.06	
Note: Dependent variable is coded 1 if the absentee ballot was challenges when returned by the voter, 0 otherwise. All variables but Hospital and 50-65 had coefficients significant at the $p<.05$ level. The baseline probability, with all variables set to 0, of ballot challenge was 0.06 (standard error .003); the first differences reported here reflect the change from this baseline probability estimated from changing the respective variable to 1, and holding all others constant at 0. First differences that are significant at the $p<.05$ level are indicated by *.			