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In The Papers

Register Late And You'll Probably Vote

Elisabeth Eaves 03.28.07, 3:00 PM ET

Get out the vote--but not too soon. That's one of the lessons for political strategists contained in a new study of voter behavior in the 2000 U.S. presidential campaign.

Looking at more than 400,000 voters in six states, including Florida and Iowa, researchers found that people who registered to vote the week of the registration deadline--about 30 days before the election in many states--were 16% more likely to vote than voters who registered one year before the deadline. More surprisingly, the GOP bettered the Democrats by "a sizable margin" when it came to getting their late-registering voters to the polls. That finding tweaks conventional wisdom, which says that Democrats stand to benefit more than Republicans from increased registration.

The discoveries by political scientists James Gimpel of the University of Maryland, Joshua Dyck of the University of Buffalo and Daron Shaw of the University of Texas will be published in their paper "Election-Year Stimuli and the Timing of Voter Registration" in the September issue of the journal *Party Politics*.

Voters who register in the heat of a political campaign, it seems, are more motivated to cast a ballot than voters who register in a more passive frame of mind. That may not be so shocking, but it adds another blow to the notion that increased registration automatically leads to increased turnout, the basis of the so-called "motor-voter" act of 1993, which allows voters to register when renewing their drivers' licenses.

Most studies of the motor-voter law suggest no major impact on turnout, said Michael McDonald, a professor of government and politics at George Mason University. For those intent on upping civic participation, "you'll get more bang for your buck if you focus on the narrow window close to the registration deadline," said Dyck, one of the authors of the new study.

How to explain the Republican advantage among late-registering voters? In most of the counties the researchers examined, the Democrats won the registration race--that is, they registered more voters in the last weeks before the cutoff. But "they had to register many more people than the Republicans because the GOP's new registrants appear to vote at almost twice the rate of new Democratic registrants," the authors write. They conclude: "These results show that the Republicans have significant incentives to find new registrants, even if in the process they wind up enrolling a few Democrats."

It's long been assumed that first-time voters would skew Democratic, because they were younger, poorer, less educated and more likely to belong to a minority.

But McDonald says he's not surprised at the possibility that increased registration could benefit Republicans. He notes that in recent years, the U.S. has seen a move toward rules that encourage absentee voting, with about 20% of voters in 2004 voting early or by mail.

"The thinking was that Democrats would benefit from the conveniences, but early indications are that it's mixed at

best," McDonald said. Likewise, newly registered voters might not fit a predictable profile--or, despite the conventional wisdom, vote Democratic.

From a party strategy point of view, registration drives have long been out of fashion. "The new strategy is to deal with the universe of voters you have," said Larry Sabato, director of the University of Virginia's Center for Politics. "That's because it takes so much time, money and effort to get people to register."

Asked to comment on the study, he said that Republican success at getting new registrants out to vote must have made a difference in close-call states like Florida--but that that doesn't necessarily mean they can summon the energy and organization to do it again.

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