

Iowa Voting Series, Paper 10: An Examination of Iowa Absentee Ballots Requested and Returned Since 2010

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Abstract

This is the tenth paper in a series examining aspects of voting in Iowa. In this paper I examine the timing of absentee ballot requests and returns in general and by party. Although the statewide data are available for only four elections, the data confirm the greater effort placed on early voting in presidential elections. Nevertheless, absentee voting is increasing in midterm elections. When examining the early vote effort by party we see that Democrats do better at the early voting game, but Republicans are catching up. The fewest absentee ballot requests come from No Party voters, particularly in midterm elections, which is no surprise given their significant turnout drop in midterms. The results also show a persistent gap between the number of requested absentee ballots and the number returned. The size of this gap varies by party with Republicans having the highest return rate followed by Democrats and then No Party voters.

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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.

- June 2015: Initial release; update to footnote 22 after posting
- December 2016: Update for inclusion of 2016 data

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In the sixth paper in this series¹ I examined absentee voting in Iowa in midterm and presidential elections since 2000, in general and by party.² In this paper I return to absentee voting to examine the timing of the requests and the number of ballots returned. As with the prior papers in this series 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 others in the series, is to examine aspects of voting in Iowa with an eye to future elections and to provide some background and context to discussions about Iowa voters.

Data

As with prior papers, 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 general election contests in Iowa, including those for presidential and midterm elections. The absentee statistics examined here are obtained from the Daily Absentee Statistics links.⁴ These reports only began with the 2010 election, so there will only be data from four general elections to examine. The format of the four reports varies somewhat, but all indicate the number of absentee ballots requested and returned for each of the three parties in Iowa (Democrats,

¹ The most recent versions of all papers in the series are currently available at <http://www.profhagle.com/papers/iowa-voting-series>. (This and other links were valid as of the date this paper was posted.) Although I make references to prior papers in the series, I would like each to stand on its own. Thus, some explanatory material will be repeated from one paper to the next to provide background or context.

² When I refer to some aspect of turnout or voting in "presidential elections" or "midterm elections" it is a shorthand way of referring to turnout or voting in that year in general, not 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 statistics regarding absentee ballots and early voting not from any particular contest except when a particular race is used as an example.

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

⁴ For example, the daily absentee statistics for the 2014 midterm election can be found at <http://sos.iowa.gov/elections/pdf/2014/general/absenteestats.pdf>.

Republicans, and No Party voters).⁵ The available reports also include some form of an “Other” category. For the 2010, 2012, and 2016 reports, “Other” is the actual label used. For the 2014 report the Other category is replaced by “Iowa Green” and “Libertarian,” which are the two Non-Party Political Organizations one can choose as alternatives to the regular Political Parties (Democratic, Republican, and No Party) when registering to vote in Iowa.⁶ The number of Other voters, however labeled, is quite small relatively speaking, never reaching even 0.4% of the overall total of those requesting an absentee ballot. Thus, for purposes of this paper I will add data regarding Other voters to that of No Party voters.

Absentee Voting in Iowa

As noted above, in the sixth paper in this series I examined several aspects of absentee voting in Iowa. It is worth repeating some of the basic information contained in that paper to make the discussion below a bit easier to follow.

Traditional absentee voting was infrequently used and more difficult than the versions used today in most states. In the past, a voter needed to have an approved excuse to request an absentee ballot. The expectation, of course, was that voters would vote at their regular polling place on Election Day unless they had a sufficient justification to cast an absentee ballot. One such justification was, as the name suggests, that the voter would be absent from his or her regular voting location on Election Day. Allowed justifications for being away often included reasons such as military service, planned travel, or college students away at school. Requests for absentee ballots often had to be filed 10 days or more prior to Election Day.

Various reforms over the years aimed at increasing voter turnout also affected absentee voting. The reforms generally removed request deadlines and the requirement of a justification for the absentee ballot.⁷ In addition, the basic notion of absentee voting has been replaced by what is now often referred to as “early voting.”

Early voting is much like regular voting in that it is done in-person, but there are two main differences. The first is that once a ballot is filled out it is placed in a security envelope that is then stored until Election Day when the envelope is opened and the ballot counted. The second difference is that the early voting does not take place at

⁵ “No Party” is what Iowa calls its independents. It seems a little odd to refer to unaffiliated No Party voters as a party. In earlier versions of some papers in the series I referred to the party registration choices as “categories.” That proved somewhat cumbersome, so I will use “party” to include No Party voters.

⁶ See the first paper in the series for more details on voter registration in Iowa.

⁷ Here is a link to Iowa’s Johnson County Auditor’s webpage for requesting a mailed absentee ballot: http://www.johnson-county.com/dept_auditor.aspx?id=14448. The actual request form is a pdf that should pop-up or request to be opened.

one's regular polling place. There are two basic locations for in-person early voting. The first is at the county auditor's office.⁸ Such in-person voting usually begins about six weeks before Election Day. The second is at a "satellite early voting station." Such satellite voting stations are smaller versions of regular voting stations, but voters from any precinct can vote at them. As with in-person voting at the county auditor's office, the ballot is placed in a security envelope and then placed in a ballot box that is stored until Election Day.

Locations for such satellite voting stations are selected either by the county auditor or by citizen petition. The goal, of course, is to encourage voters to cast their ballots by making it easier for them. The locations selected are often those where there tends to be a lot of people during the day. These can include locations such as grocery stores, hospitals, libraries, college residence halls, and so on.

It is also worth mentioning that there is a political element to the selection of locations for satellite voting stations. This may not be surprising given that county auditors in Iowa are elected on a partisan ballot. On the other hand, many, if not most, county auditors prefer to exercise their duties in a nonpartisan way. Those auditors who take a more partisan approach to their job can select areas for satellite voting stations that have a higher concentration of voters of their party while downplaying those locations with more voters of the opposing party. Requesting a satellite location by petition helps to balance such partisan choices, but county auditors can still make the process difficult if they are so inclined.

Despite the popularity of in-person early voting, more traditional absentee ballots are still available and used by many people. Procedurally, although no reason need be given for requesting an absentee ballot, the voter must still fill out the request to have a ballot mailed to him or her by the county auditor. The time limit now is based on the expectation of how long it will take for a mailed ballot to reach the voter and then be returned to the county auditor.⁹ As most who watch election returns know, ballots returned by mail can be counted as long as they are postmarked by the day before the election even if received a few days later.¹⁰

⁸ In Iowa, the county auditor is the local elected official in charge of elections along with his or her other duties. At the state level, the Secretary of State is the elected official in charge of elections. To make things a bit more confusing, Iowa also has an Auditor of State, whose duties are financial.

⁹ The Johnson County Auditor's website indicates that the deadline for requesting a mailed absentee ballot is the Friday before the election (http://www.johnson-county.com/dept_auditor.aspx?id=14448).

¹⁰ The Johnson County Auditor's website notes that the United States Postal Service no longer postmarks local mail. This is important because ballots received after Election Day without a postmark cannot be counted (http://www.johnson-county.com/dept_auditor.aspx?id=14448). As an alternative to mailing a late ballot, in Iowa absentee ballots mailed to voters can be returned in person at the county auditor's office on Election Day before the polls close.

Aside from basic procedural differences between traditional absentee voting and in-person early voting there is also a fundamental difference in terms of requesting such a ballot. Although parties and campaigns will encourage voters to make use of satellite voting stations, it is the voter who makes the basic decision as to when and where to do so. As with regular voting, the voter wishing to cast an in-person early vote simply shows up at the designated time and location for the satellite station and requests a ballot. In contrast, parties and campaigns will actively solicit mailed absentee ballot requests from voters. The general goal is to boost turnout for a particular party or campaign. Campaign or party workers are usually trained in the procedures for soliciting absentee ballot requests and will do so while going door to door or at a location with heavy foot traffic (again, grocery stores, etc.). An additional goal of soliciting absentee ballot requests is to reach voters who may be less reliable in terms of their voting history. Parties and campaigns often have access to a voter's voting history. Those who have a history of not always voting will be targeted for absentee ballot requests. Shut-ins and those who might have more difficulty voting (e.g., elderly voters in care facilities) are also targeted.

Two aspects of the conventional wisdom regarding absentee voting are worth mentioning at this point. The first bit of conventional wisdom is that Democrats are better at the absentee and early voting game than Republicans. This means that they do a better job of getting their voters to either request absentee ballots or to vote early at satellite voting stations. The auditor in my county (Johnson) regularly posts updates on the number of requests for absentee ballots or early votes cast and political activists of both parties keep a close eye on those figures.¹¹ Tracking absentee ballot requests became sufficiently popular that, as noted above, the Iowa Secretary of State began including Daily Absentee Statistics among its posted election information. The reasonable assumption is that voters who cast absentee ballots will vote for their party's candidates, which means such votes are already "in the bank," so to speak, prior to Election Day. Along these lines, stories following the 2012 presidential election noted that Republican candidate Mitt Romney had more votes for him cast on Election Day in Iowa, but the lead amassed by Democrats as a result of their early voting efforts on behalf of President Obama was too much to overcome.¹² Along with party regulars, journalists are taking more notice of such figures and sometimes write of one candidate having "a lead" over his or her opponent based on early vote figures. Such figures may also be used in projections for the race in question.¹³

A second bit of conventional wisdom is that Republicans tend to prefer to vote on Election Day. Although Democrats are better at the early voting game, Republicans

¹¹ The eleventh paper in this series examines absentee and early voting in Johnson County.

¹² See, for example, <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/dec/06/news/la-pn-obama-early-voting-key-victory-20121205>.

¹³ See, for example, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/upshot/north-carolina-early-vote-tracker.html>.

have certainly tried to improve in this area. One stumbling block is the preference of many Republicans to wait until Election Day to cast their ballot. One might argue that this preference comes from a generally more “traditionalist” view held by many Republicans. Regardless of the reason for the preference, it does seem to put Republicans at a disadvantage as they work to catch up to Democrats in this area.

Before turning to an examination of the available data I need to comment on the terminology used below. As noted above, referring to “absentee” voting usually calls to mind the traditional mailed ballot. Although that would certainly count as an early vote, the term “early voting” usually refers to an in-person vote, either at the county auditor’s office or a satellite voting station. Of course, those two types of early voting still require a request for a ballot and a return. The Secretary of State’s statistics only refer to absentee voting and do not distinguish between traditional mailed ballots and the in-person early voting. Unfortunately, in the discussion below I often need to make that distinction. To do so I will usually use the terms “traditional” or “mail” when referring traditional mailed absentee ballots. I will usually use the term “in-person” when referring to early voting that takes place in-person at county auditor’s offices or at satellite voting stations.

Daily Absentee Ballots Requested

Figure 1 shows the daily absentee ballot requests for the 2010 through 2016 general elections.¹⁴ The horizontal axis of Figure 1 indicates the days prior to the election. The first thing to mention about lines in Figure 1 is that they do not all start on the same number of days before the election. Iowa law requires that absentee ballots be mailed at least 40 days prior to the election, 45 days for military and overseas ballots. Requests for absentee ballots can be received prior to that, of course, so we see that the lines for 2012 and 2016 begin 50 days from the election. Regardless of when the county auditors begin receiving requests and reporting them to the Secretary of State, it appears that there is some flexibility as to when to begin reporting the information for the Daily Absentee Statistics. In 2010 the statistics do not begin until 47 days from the election. For 2014 they begin 44 days out. Given that the smallest number initially reported was 53,643 for the 2010 election we can safely assume that the requests had been accumulating for some time before the information was posted.

A second item to mention about the lines is that you will see periodic flat areas. Even though some early voting can take place on Saturdays, and even Sundays when the election nears, the posted daily reports do not include weekends. To fill these blank spots I simply repeated the data from a given Friday for the following Saturday and Sunday. This resulted in short flat areas on the lines in Figures 1 through 3.

¹⁴ 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.

Turning to the substance of the lines, it should come as no surprise that the absentee requests for the 2012 and 2016 presidential elections were well above the lines for either of the two midterm elections. As noted in prior papers in the series, turnout is substantially up in presidential election years. In addition, campaigns put more effort into their early voting efforts in presidential years. For comparison, in 2012 there were 741,771 requests while in 2014 there were 530,494 and in 2010 there were 398,996. That the line for 2014 is above that for 2010 should also be no surprise. From Figure 2 of the sixth paper we saw that there has been a steady increase in absentee voting in midterm elections since 2006.

Of additional interest is that the line for 2016 is below that for 2012. Again, the general trend has been for increases in absentee and early voting so one might have expected higher numbers for 2016. The likely explanation is that it was clear fairly early on that enthusiasm for either of the two major party candidates was not as high as in 2012. This undoubtedly lessened the desire to either request an absentee ballot or to cast an early vote. Related to the enthusiasm question is that a larger than usual number of voters were probably unsure of who they would vote for until much closer to Election Day. Voters who make use of absentee or early voting are generally convinced of their choices much earlier than those who wait. Greater uncertainty regarding both of the two major party candidates (e.g., waiting for the latest news in Clinton's email scandal or the latest outrageous statement by Trump) likely caused more voters to wait until Election Day before making their choice.¹⁵

Given that a focus of this paper concerns the timing of the absentee requests the shapes of the lines are of particular interest. Somewhat surprisingly, all four lines are fairly straight. Because the line represents the cumulative number of requests a fairly straight line indicates that the rate of new requests during the early voting period was steady. The lines for 2010 and 2012 are a little flatter at their start, suggesting that it may have taken some time before the early voting efforts were in full swing. At the other end of the lines we do not see much if any tapering off just before the election. Although we might think that within a few days of the election voters and campaigns may be turning their focus to Election Day, that is also when there are often additional opportunities scheduled to cast an early ballot at a satellite polling station.

On a related point, keep in mind the two different types of requests indicated by these numbers. At the very beginning of each line the number of requests will primarily be for traditional absentee ballots the county auditor mails to the prospective voters.

¹⁵ A delay in making a choice would seem to affect early in-person voting more than traditional absentee voting. With the latter, a voter could simply request the ballot but not return it until a candidate choice was made. That said, the number of registered voters who were seriously considering not voting was likely higher than usual for this presidential election and many who were considering not voting as an option probably would not want to request a ballot.

Within 40 days of the election the requests also include in-person early voting at the county auditor's office or at a satellite voting station, but the availability of satellite voting stations tends to increase as the election approaches.¹⁶

Daily Absentee Ballots Returned

A main difference between the traditional absentee ballot procedure (mail in a request and mail back a completed ballot) and in-person early voting at the county auditor's office or a satellite voting station is that the request and return of the ballot occurs at the same time for in-person voting. That leads us to Figure 2, which repeats the four lines from Figure 1 and adds in the daily number of returned ballots. As with the Requested lines, the small flat areas of the Returned lines represent values from a Friday carried over to Saturday and Sunday. We also see that the beginning of the Returned lines starts later than the Requested lines for 2010, 2012, and 2016. This should be no surprise as the early requests were primarily mailed and it would take some time for them to be returned. The Returned line for 2014 election begins at the same time as the Requested line, but this is likely just a function of reporting the requested data a bit later than in the other three elections.

The Returned lines are not quite as straight as the Requested lines. We see a slight bowing in the Returned lines as the slope is somewhat flat at the start of the line but increases as it gets closer to the election. Of necessity, this bowing is due to traditional absentee ballot returns. Many voters who make an early request for a traditional absentee ballot may wait until much closer to the election before filling it out and returning it. The canvassers for campaigns who often go door to door to encourage voters to request traditional absentee ballots likely make sure that the voter supports their particular candidate, but voters may still delay completing the ballots and sending them back if they remain undecided regarding races other than the main ones or other ballot items (e.g., local races that may be nonpartisan, bond issues).

The most interesting part of the Returned lines is that they never meet the Requested lines. In other words, some of the voters who have been mailed absentee ballots never return them. Some of the gap between Requested and Returned ballots will be due to voters who choose to bring their absentee ballot with them to the polls on Election Day, but that number is likely small.¹⁷ Thus, a fair number of people choose not to vote even after requesting a ballot.

¹⁶ Here is the Johnson County schedule of satellite voting stations for the 2014 election: http://www.johnson-county.com/dept_auditor.aspx?id=15957. Notice that although some satellite stations are available quite early, the number of opportunities for early voting jumps sharply in the last three weeks before the election.

¹⁷ Some ballots that are returned may not be counted if the ballot is "spoiled" in some way or, as indicated previously, arrives late. Again, however, the number of returned ballots that are not counted for technical reasons is likely small.

The reasons for not returning a ballot will vary. Aside from those who mailed the ballot back too late, some may have just forgotten to send it back. Others may have simply chosen to not vote. One might wonder why a person would request a ballot and then decide not to send it back. Here again, the reasons can vary. Some might have requested the ballot just to get the canvasser to go away. (Seriously, some of those soliciting absentee ballot requests can be pretty persistent!) Others may have simply changed their minds regarding the candidates or races.

Although I will come back to the issue of ballots that were not returned, let me first turn to the number of requested and returned ballots by party.

Daily Absentee Ballots Requested and Returned by Party

Figure 3 is divided into four parts, one for each of the four elections examined here. Each of the four parts separates the number of absentee ballots requested and returned by party: Democrat, Republican, and No Party (which includes Other voters as well). The vertical scale for each of the four parts of Figure 3 is the same. This allows for a better comparison of the four elections.

Figure 3a shows the party Requested and Returned lines for the 2010 midterm election. It is no particular surprise that the lines are fairly close together for this election. As noted in previous papers, both turnout and absentee ballot requests are lower in midterm elections.¹⁸ We might not expect the use of absentee voting to necessarily decrease in midterm years given that those who vote in such elections are generally considered more reliable voters, but without a unifying presidential campaign – and the resources that come with it – the early vote effort is not as extensive.

Despite the closeness of the lines, notice that none of the Requested lines cross, nor do any of the Returned lines. In other words, the lines for Democrats are always above those for Republicans, which are always above those for No Party voters. Democrats took an early lead in requests and held it throughout the early voting period. Republicans closed the gap to about 28,000 with 25 days to go before the election, narrowed it a bit more to about 22,000 by day 18, but were not able to get any closer as the gap widened again to over 29,000 by Election Day. Both Republican and No Party requests started slowly, with Republicans only slightly ahead. At about a month before the election the Republican early voting effort kicked in and their requests increased dramatically creating a clear separation from the No Party requests.

The Returned lines for all three parties show the slightly bowed feature we saw in Figure 2 in that they increase more slowly than the Requested lines near the beginning

¹⁸ See, in particular, Figures 1 and 2 of the sixth paper in the series.

of the early voting period, but then increase more quickly as the election nears. As we would expect, the much larger number of requests and resulting returns by Democrats and Republicans meant that their Returned lines crossed even the Requested line for No Party voters well before the election. For the Democrats this occurred with about four weeks to go and for Republicans with about three weeks left. It was not until just a day before the election that the returns for Democrats pulled ahead of the requests for Republicans.

The final item to notice in Figure 3a is that the final gap between the Requested and Returned lines we saw in Figure 2 is present here for all three parties. We would expect the gap to vary among the parties, but I will examine the party gaps in a bit more detail after considering the daily statistics for the 2012, 2014, and 2016 elections.

Turning to Figure 3b we see the daily Requested and Returned lines of the three parties for the 2012 presidential election. Consistent with what we saw in Figure 2 the number of requested and returned ballots is much larger than in 2010 for all three parties. Democrats emphasized their early voting effort and it shows in the large lead they had at the start of the early voting period. Another interesting aspect of this is that the number of requests from No Party voters was also above that from Republicans for the first two weeks of data. Again, this generally reflects the effort by Democrats to identify No Party voters who supported President Obama.

At the start of the period Democrats had about 80,000 more requests than Republicans. Republicans only closed to within about 68,000 by day 25, but Democrats eventually widened their lead back to over 83,000 by Election Day. As noted, No Party requests started ahead of those by Republicans. Republican requests surpassed those of No Party voters by day 35, but the eventual gap between the two was much closer than for the 2010 election.

Given the much larger number of requests from Democrats it is not surprising that the Democrats' Returned line crosses the Requested lines for Republicans and No Party voters much more quickly than it did in 2010. Also interesting regarding the Democrats' Returned line is the surge at about five weeks from the election. It was at this time that the Democrats' Returned line crossed the Requested line for No Party voters and would have crossed the Requested line for Republicans as well had there not been a surge in Republican requests at about the same time.

Once again, in 2012 we see a gap between the Requested and Returned lines for each of the parties. Given the larger numbers involved we can also see a clear distinction between the gaps in that the largest belongs to Democrats and the smallest to Republicans. Again, more on this below.

Figure 3c shows the Requested and Returned lines of the three parties for the 2014 election. As we saw in Figure 2, although the numbers are below those of 2012 for this midterm election they are still well above those for 2010. Overall there were about 40,000 more absentee requests for both Democrats and No Party voters, but about 50,000 more for Republicans. The gap between the Requested lines for Democrats and Republicans was not as large as in 2010 and even closed to less than 10,000 on day 13 before widening again. Despite the increase in No party requests compared to 2010, the larger increase for Republicans meant that the gap between them widened.

The data for returned ballots for this election begins the same day as the requested data, so the Returned lines for all three parties are bunched together during the first few days (and Republicans actually had more returns for the first two days of reporting). As expected, the Democrats' Returned line quickly moved above those for Republicans and No Party voters. What was unexpected, however, was that the number of Republican returns actually pulled ahead of that of Democrats on day 13 (though you cannot see it on the chart). The difference was only 363 ballots, and the lead only lasted one day, but it was certainly something noticed by those who were keeping a close eye on the daily statistics. Although the Returned line for Democrats then pulled ahead of the Republican line for the remainder of the early voting period, it is interesting to note that it never went ahead of the Republican Requested line. In other words, the gap between the Democrats' Requested and Returned lines was greater than that between the Democrats' and Republicans' Requested lines. In addition, although the overall numbers are lower than in 2012, in Figure 3c we can again see that the gap between the Republicans' Requested and Returned lines is smaller than that for either Democrats or No Party voters.

Figure 3d shows the Requested and Returned lines for the 2016 election. As expected, the lines for this presidential election are higher than they were for the 2014 midterm election. They are, however, mostly below those for the 2012 presidential election. As noted previously, this runs counter to the trend of increasing numbers of absentee and early voters. The requests for Democrats were down by about 26,600. No Party requests also decreased by about 28,200. In sharp contrast, Republican requests were up by nearly 6,700. Of additional interest, although I have combined the Other and No Party categories, requests for Other voters (Libertarian and Green Party) were actually up in 2016 as well. There were 999 Other requests in 2012, but 2,662 in 2016.

As noted previously, the decrease in requests from Democrats and No Party voters can be easily explained from the general lack of enthusiasm for the major party candidates. The increase in requests from voters in the Other category can also be attributed largely to that lack of enthusiasm and the resulting increase in interest in the Libertarian and Green Party candidates. Of course, the lack of enthusiasm does not explain the increase in Republican absentee requests and early voting. This is particularly so given the widely acknowledged lack of a Trump campaign organization. I suspect that the same

two factors that resulted in an Iowa victory for Trump in the general election also contributed to the increase in Republican requests. First, it seems that most observers overstated the efficacy of the Clinton campaign organization and understated that of Trump. Second, the Republican Party of Iowa was never as hostile to Trump as other state party organizations. That made it much easier for the state party and county organizations to fill in the gaps left by the Trump campaign in terms of get out the vote efforts.

Before moving on from Figure 3d it is also worth pointing out the differences between the requested and returned ballots for each party. A quick visual inspection of the differences between each pair of party lines suggests that Republicans had the fewest non-returned ballots, followed by the No Party voters, with Democrats having the largest gap. In terms of raw numbers, this was essentially the same pattern observed for the prior three elections. At this point we can turn to a closer examination of these gaps.

Differences in the Requested and Returned Lines

During most of the early voting period we expect that returned absentee ballots will lag behind the number of requests. As Election Day approaches the pace of returned ballots will pick up, which is what caused the Returned lines to appear somewhat bowed in Figures 2 and 3. We also noticed in Figures 2 and 3 that the final gap between the number of requested ballots and those returned remained fairly large. Although the gap existed in all four elections for all three parties, we also noticed some size differences.

Figure 4 plots the percentage of returned ballots for each of the three parties for each of the four elections examined. Despite only having four elections to examine, there are still some interesting aspects to these percentages. The first is that the percentage of returned ballots is higher in the two presidential elections than in the two midterm elections. This result is similar to what we saw in previous papers regarding turnout in general, which was nearly 20% higher in presidential versus midterm elections.¹⁹ The presidential-midterm difference is much smaller for returned ballots, however, given that the average overall return percentage in the two midterm elections is only about five percent below the presidential elections. In addition, the return percentages are certainly much higher than the turnout averages. Where the overall turnout averages for the general elections since 2000 was just under 64%²⁰, the overall returned ballot

¹⁹ See Figure 1 of the second paper in the series for specific percentages of the general elections examined since 2000.

²⁰ As I write this the Statewide Statistical Report has not been issued for the 2016 general election, so the 64% figure includes only elections through 2014.

percentage for the four elections examined here was just above of 90%.²¹ That the returned percentage is much higher than the turnout percentage is not surprising. Requesting a ballot is something that requires a bit of effort and must be done for each election. That effort and the tangible ballot that arrives likely represent more of a commitment and reminder to vote than a voter registration card tucked away somewhere.

The second thing to notice about the percentages in Figure 4 is that the ordering of the parties is also similar to the turnout pattern we saw for the general elections. In Figure 3 of the second paper in the series we saw that Republicans consistently had the highest turnout percentages, No Party voters the lowest, and Democrats always between the other two. Although the vertical scale on Figure 4 is not the same as that of Figure 3 from the second paper, we can see from the percentages at the bottom of each figure that the differences between Democrats and Republicans are roughly the same for returned ballots as for turnout in general. No Party voters provide the main difference from the general turnout pattern in that their returned percentage is much closer to that of Democrats than is the case for turnout. Again, although No Party voters may not be as reliable in general, having made the commitment to vote by requesting an absentee ballot they are more likely to follow through.

As always, just looking at percentages does not tell the whole story. Figure 5 shows the numbers of absentee ballots requested and returned by party for the three elections. This figure essentially converts the Election Day data from the four parts of Figure 3 into columns for easier comparison.

Despite the higher returned percentages for Republicans shown in Figure 4, the much larger number of requests by Democrats means their number of returned ballots was still well above that of Republicans. The difference is much closer for the two midterm elections, particularly in 2014. It is also noteworthy that all three parties substantially increased their number of absentee voters in 2014 over 2010. Of course, the number of absentee ballots requested and returned for the two presidential elections were much larger than for either of the midterms. In fact, over half of all registered Democrats cast an absentee ballot in 2012.²² As noted previously, more resources tend to be available for absentee and early voting efforts in presidential years. In addition, Democrats placed particular emphasis on early voting in 2012 as a way to counter what was perceived as a lower level of enthusiasm relative to the 2008 campaign.

²¹ Again, see the second paper in the series for more details. The overall turnout for the 2010, 2012, and 2014 elections (figures for the 2016 election being not yet available) was just shy of 60%.

²² See Figure 3 of the sixth paper in the series.

Concluding Comments

There are two remaining points to mention. The first concerns the distribution between mailed absentee ballots and in-person early voting. This distribution is important because it gives us a better understanding of the reasons for the gap between requested and returned ballots. That knowledge, in turn, will aid campaigns and election officials in developing approaches to reducing that gap.

Recall from the prior discussion that there are some technical reasons a returned ballot might not be counted, regardless of whether it was submitted via mail or by an in-person vote. These include a problem with the signature or address on the affidavit envelope (which contains the security envelope with the ballot). Although such problems are more likely to occur with ballots returned by mail because a poll worker was not present to assist the voter, they can also occur with in-person early ballots. Another problem that can result in an early ballot not being counted is if the voter dies between the time of returning the ballot and Election Day. Though (hopefully!) rare, such deaths do happen and ballots cast by voters who died before Election Day cannot be counted.²³

On the other hand, technical problems that affect only ballots returned by mail are those that arrive too late or arrive after Election Day without a postmark indicating they were mailed on time. Aside from the technical reasons a returned ballot might not be counted, some mailed absentee ballots simply will not be returned by the voter for one reason or another.

As I noted previously, one practical difference between early voting by mail versus in-person is that with in-person voting the ballot is effectively returned at the same time it is requested. Given the small number of in-person ballots that are requested but not counted for technical reasons, the vast majority of the difference between requested and returned ballots comes from the traditional mailed ballots.

Unfortunately, the data provided on the Secretary of State's website do not distinguish between the two types of early ballots. On the other hand, the Johnson County Auditor's website does break down the different types of early ballots.²⁴ Although Johnson County should not be considered representative of Iowa as a whole, a quick look at statistics for the same four elections examined in this paper shows that mailed ballots accounted for 36.2% of all early votes in 2016, 59.5% in 2014, 46.2% in 2012, and 46.0% in 2010.²⁵ Quite frankly, this is a higher percentage than I expected, particularly

²³ Insert obligatory joke about voting in Chicago/Illinois here.

²⁴ My thanks to John Deeth and other members of the Johnson County Auditor's office who discussed with me how absentee ballots are handled and counted.

²⁵ Links to the Johnson County Auditor's Early Voting Statistics for the three elections can be found as follows: 2016 (<http://www.johnson-county.com/auditor/returns/1611abstats.htm>), 2014

given the large number of in-person early voting opportunities provided in Johnson County. The large amount of mailed ballots means the percentage of unreturned mail ballots is not pushed significantly above the overall percentage gap between requested and returned ballots but is still higher than the average (see Figure 4).²⁶

Regardless of the specific percentage of mailed ballots, there are certainly enough of them not returned that campaigns need to focus on making sure those requesting mailed ballots return them in time. Campaigns usually have “chasers” who track the requests and returned ballots. Of course, having people first work to obtain the requests and then track them later takes a substantial effort. It is often easier for campaigns to publicize satellite voting stations and direct people to them. Still, if a campaign has emphasized mailed ballot requests it should plan to follow up to be sure votes are not lost due to unreturned ballots.

The final point to mention involves the question of whether the various ways of voting early actually increase turnout or do they simply “cannibalize” Election Day turnout. The data presented here do not address that question in any conclusive way, but the answer is likely some combination of the two. As noted in prior papers, turnout in Iowa has remained fairly steady while the percentage of absentee voting has steadily increased, which suggests more of the cannibalizing aspect. Regardless of the extent to which absentee voting efforts increase turnout, there is certainly value in making sure supporters cast a ballot. Early votes cast by supporters allow campaigns to focus their Election Day get out the vote efforts on a smaller number of people – members of their party and identified supporters who have not yet voted. In addition, early votes minimize the amount of damage an “October surprise” of one sort or another can do to a campaign.²⁷ Thus, rather than thinking about “winning” the early voting game, campaigns should just see it as an additional method of getting as many votes as possible.

(http://www.johnson-county.com/dept_auditor.aspx?id=16018), 2012 (<http://www.johnson-county.com/auditor/returns/1211stat.htm>), and 2010 (<http://www.johnson-county.com/auditor/returns/1011stat.htm>).

²⁶ Based on the data provided at the links in the prior footnote, the percentage of unreturned mailed ballots was 7.4% in 2016, 15.6% in 2014, 8.4% in 2012, and 12.7% in 2010.

²⁷ For those not familiar with the term, the notion of an “October surprise” is something that happens within a few weeks of Election Day that hurts that candidate’s chances. This could be some devastating piece of opposition research or a gaffe from which the candidate does not have time to recover before Election Day.

Figure 1: Cumulative Total Absentee Ballots Requested by Number of Days Prior to Election Since 2010

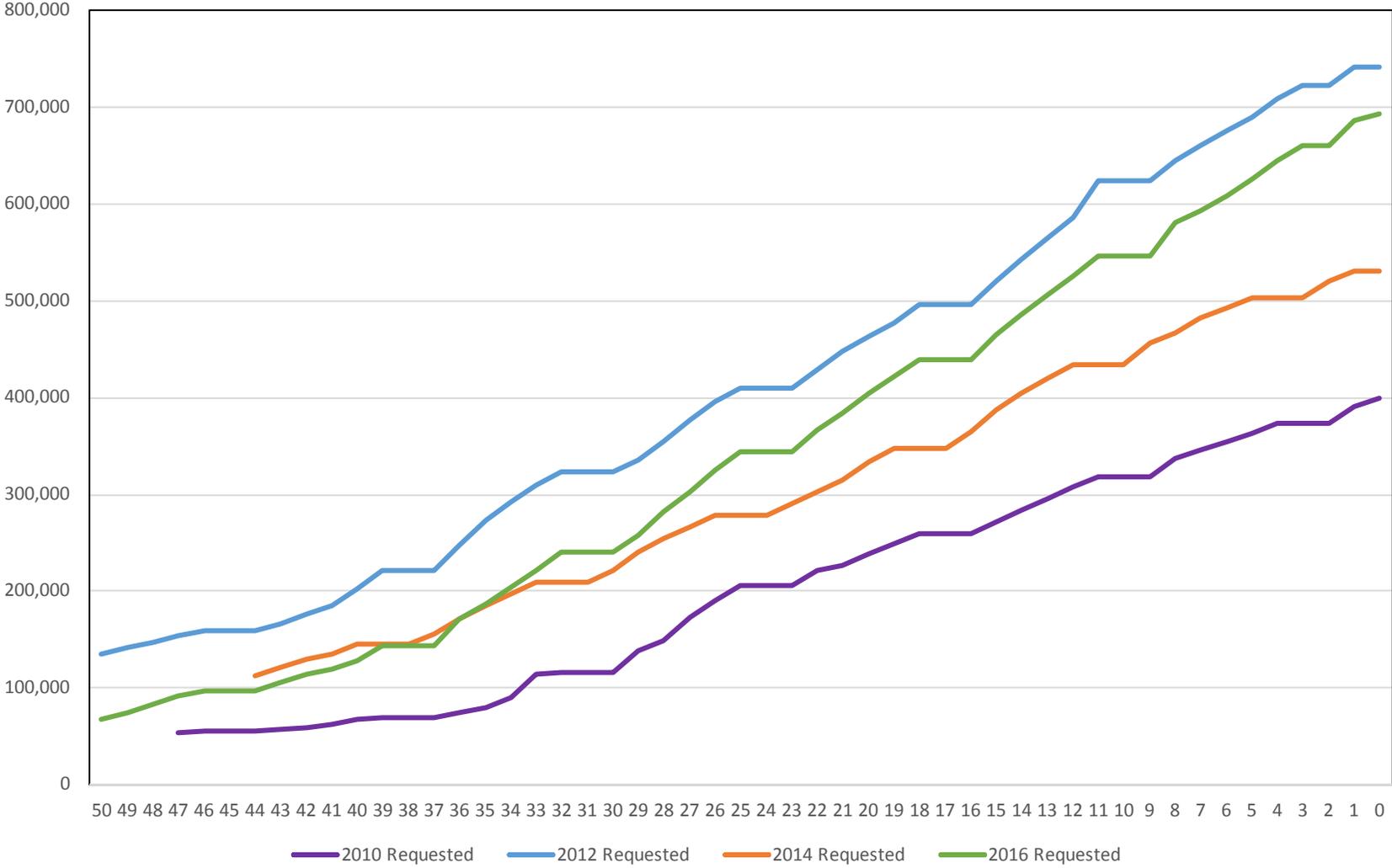


Figure 2: Cumulative Total Absentee Ballots Requested and Returned by Number of Days Prior to Election Since 2010

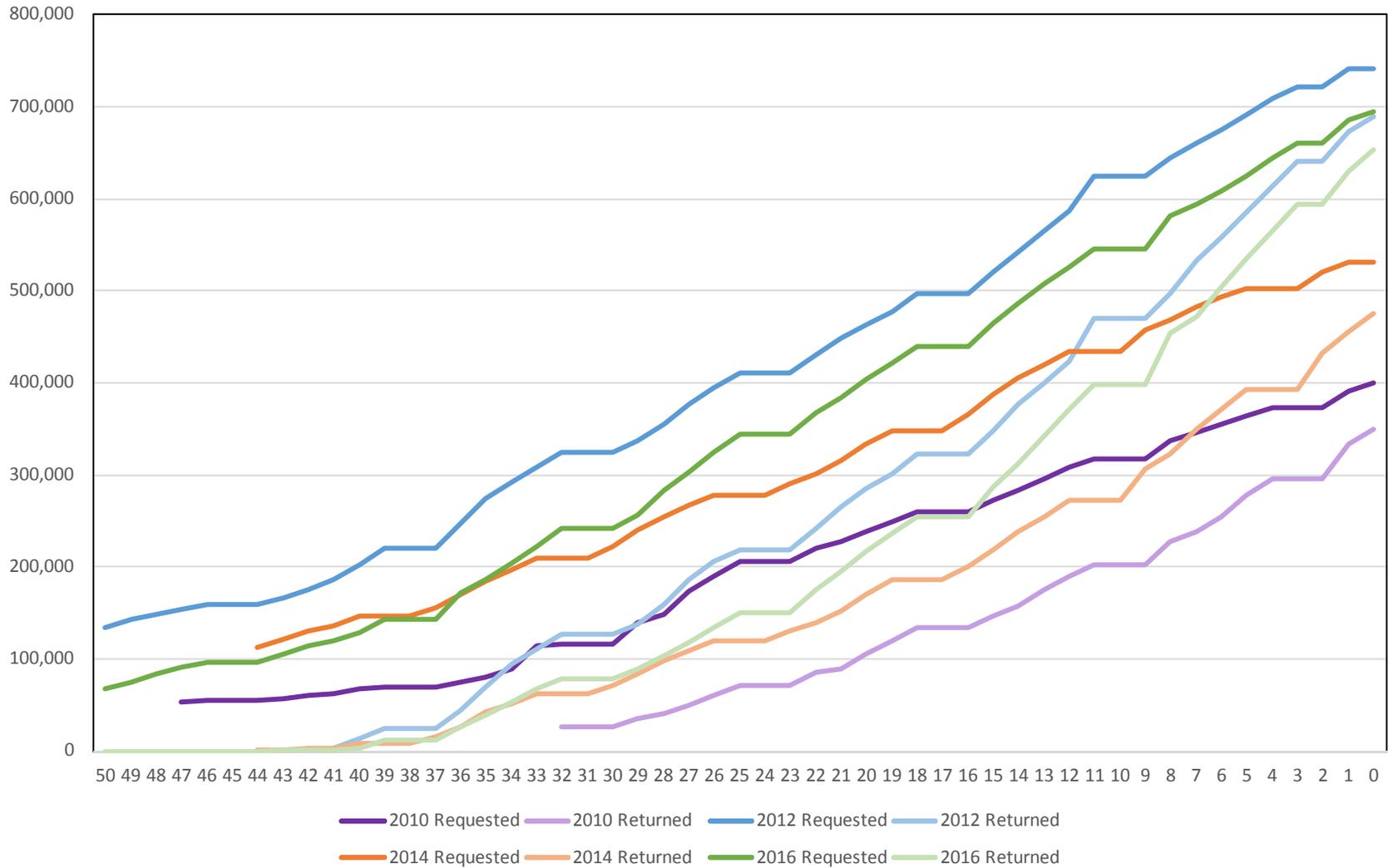


Figure 3a: Cumulative Total Absentee Ballots Requested and Returned by Party and Number of Days Prior to 2010 Election

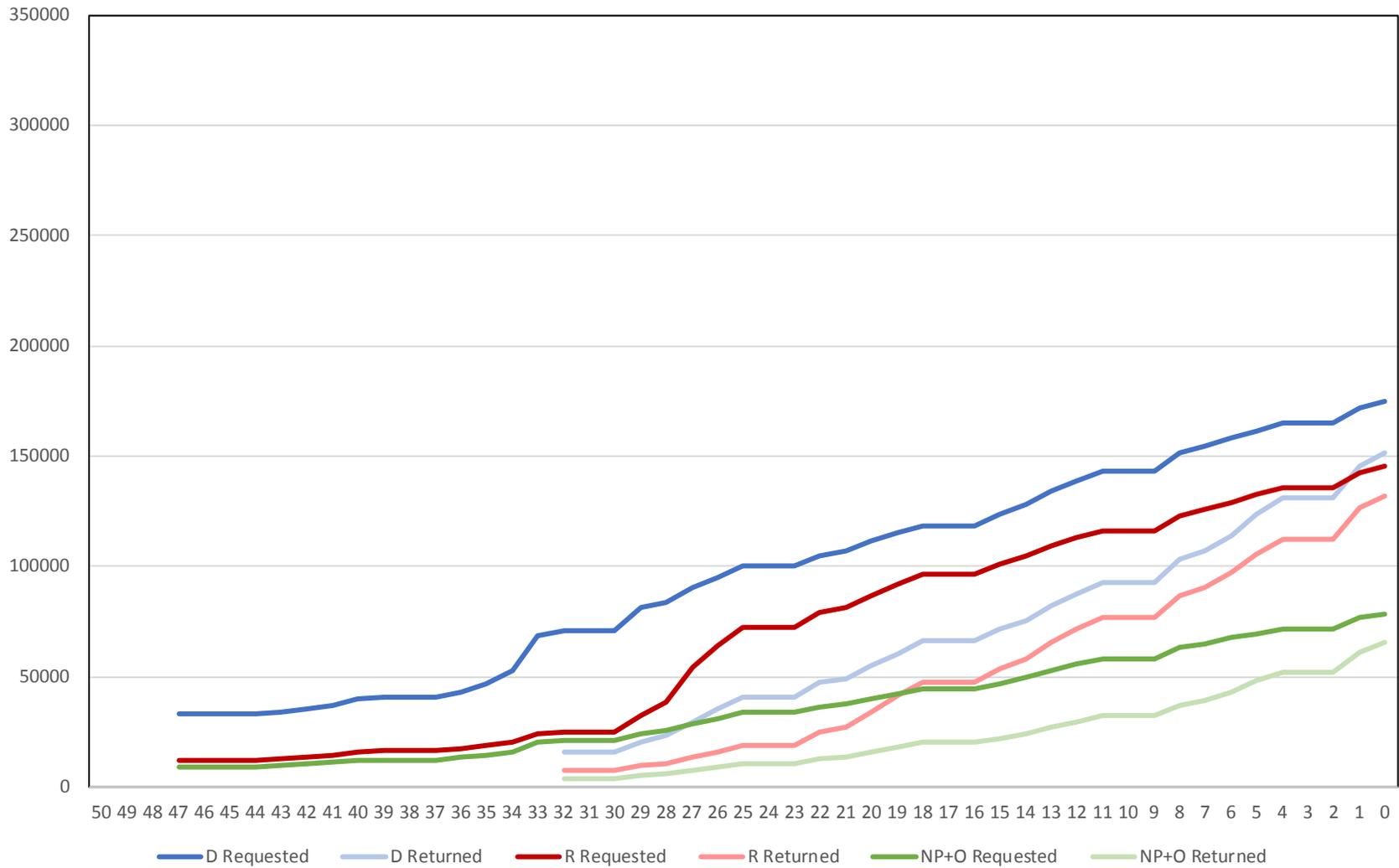


Figure 3b: Cumulative Total Absentee Ballots Requested and Returned by Party and Number of Days Prior to 2012 Election

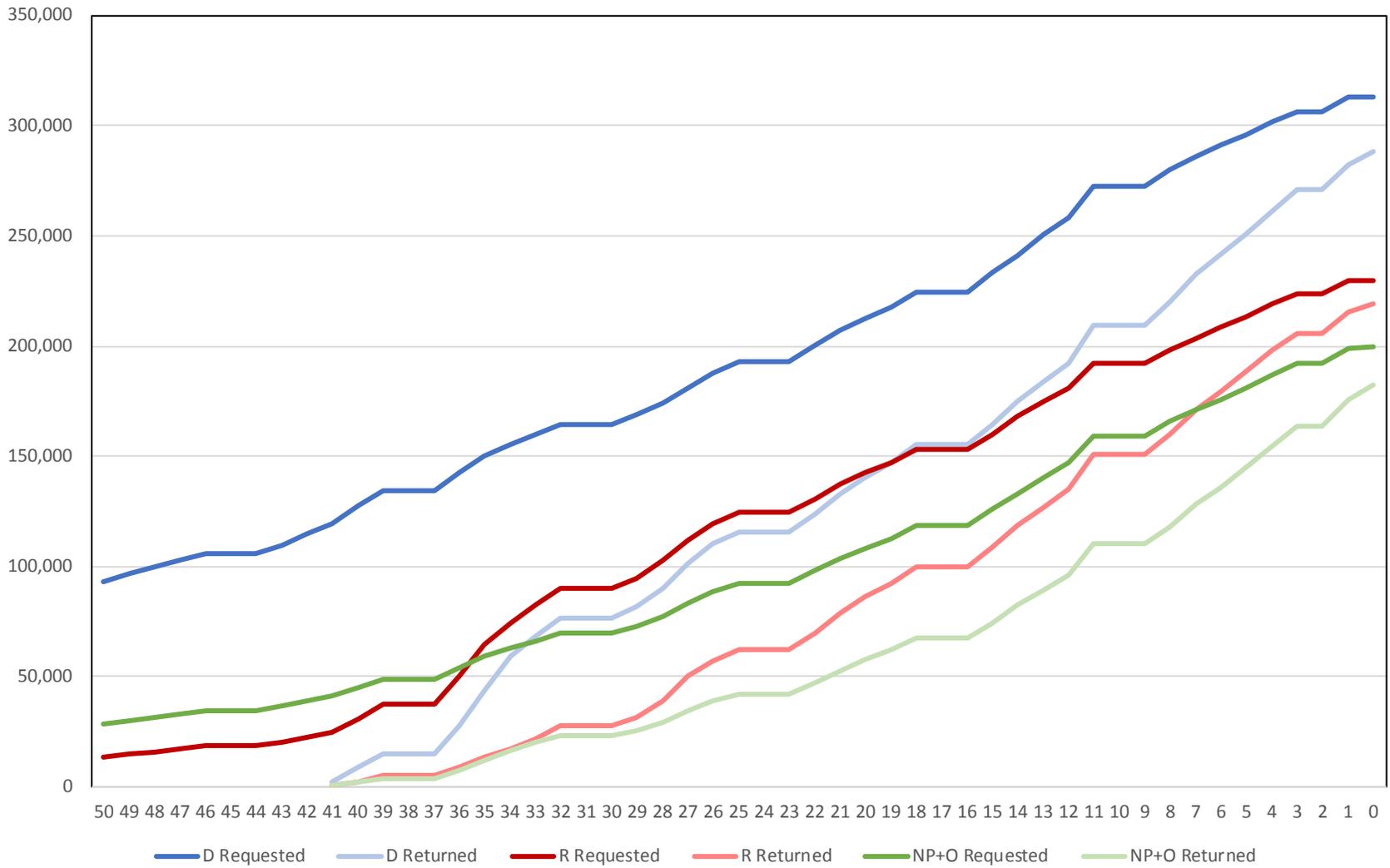


Figure 3c: Cumulative Total Absentee Ballots Requested and Returned by Party and Number of Days Prior to 2014 Election

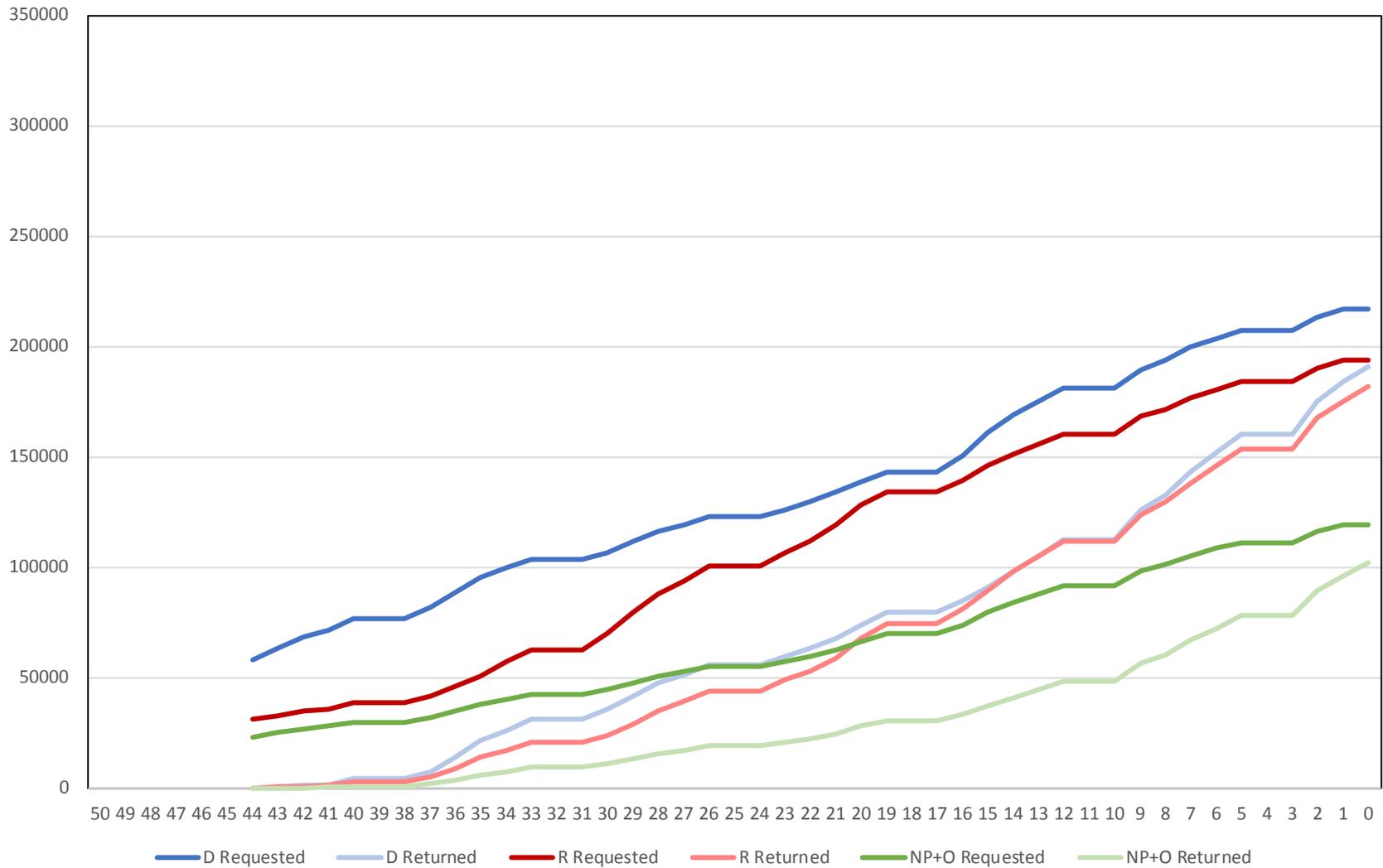


Figure 3d: Cumulative Total Absentee Ballots Requested and Returned by Party and Number of Days Prior to 2016 Election

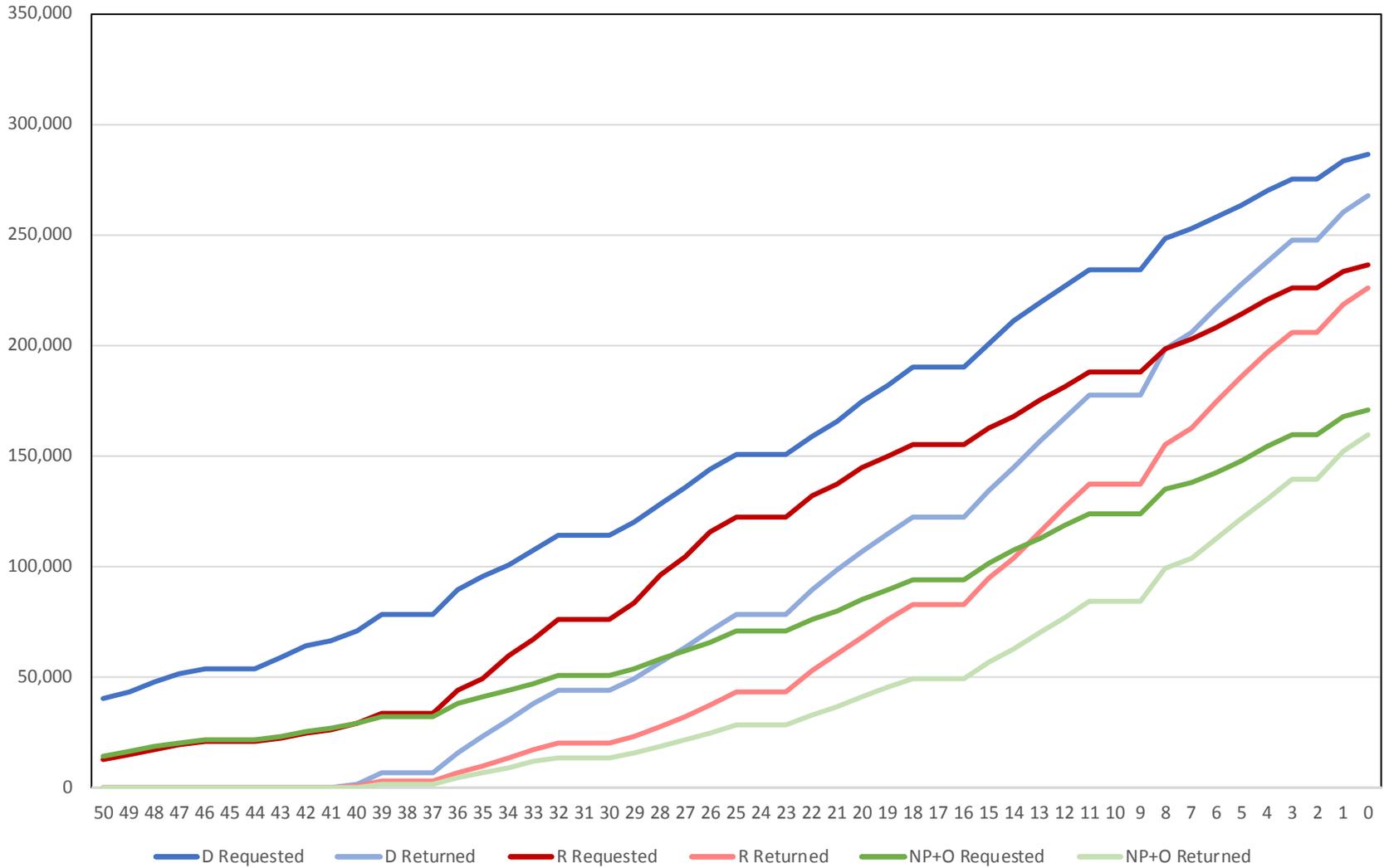


Figure 4: Percent of Returned Absentee Ballots by Party in Elections Since 2010

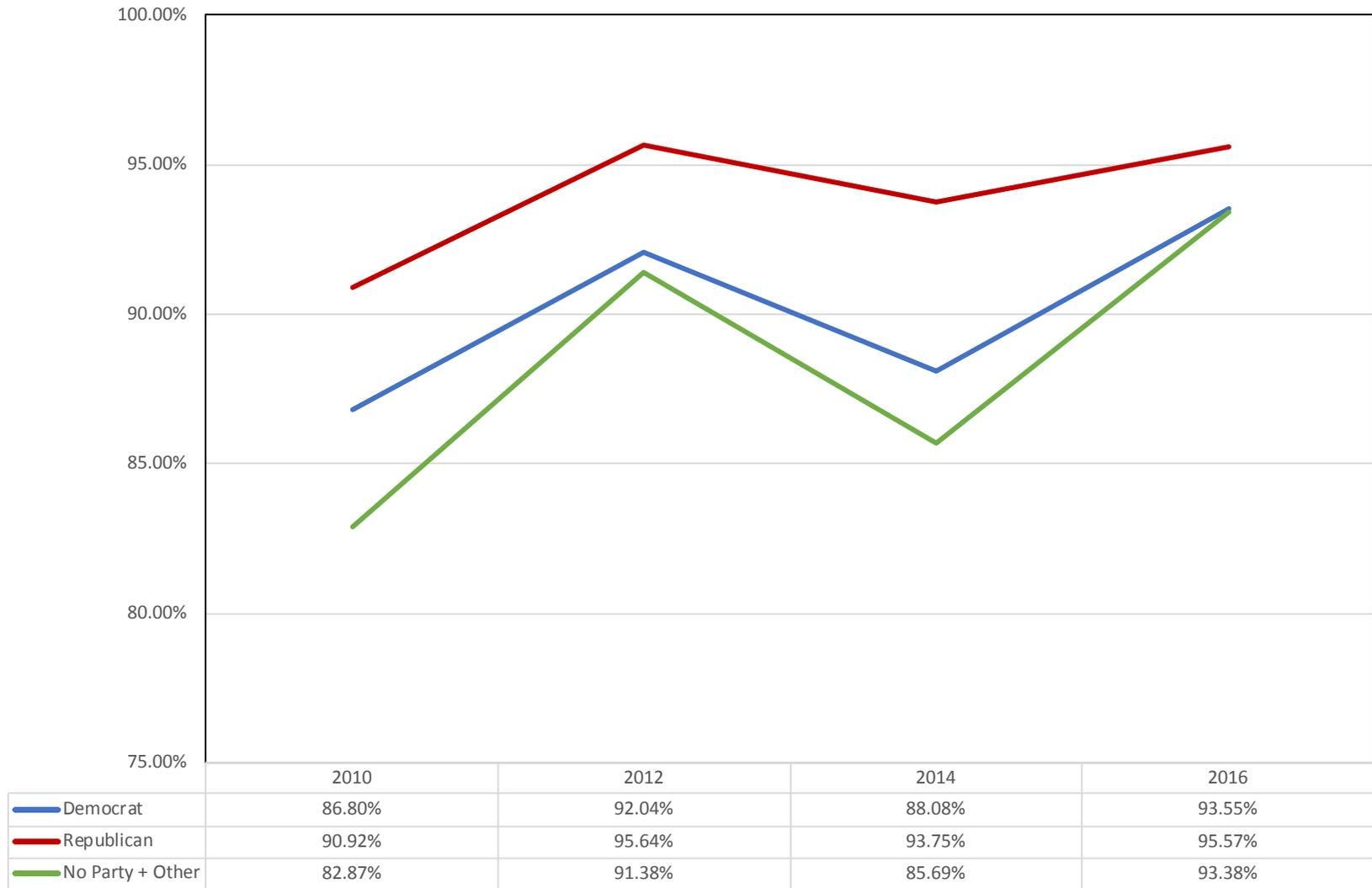


Figure 5: Number of Returned and Unreturned Absentee Ballots by Party in Elections Since 2010

