

Iowa Voting Series, Paper 2: An Examination of Iowa Turnout Statistics Since 1982

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Abstract

This is the second paper in a series examining aspects of voting in Iowa. In this paper I examine Iowa's turnout in presidential and midterm elections since 1982. Turnout for voters registered as Democrats or Republicans is quite good, but turnout for No Party voters (Iowa's name for independents) is much lower. Republican turnout in the period examined is always higher than that of Democrats, but with only a few exceptions the two track fairly closely. Consistent with conventional wisdom and other examinations turnout is much lower in midterm election years. The average drop for Democrats during the period examined is 15.39%, for Republicans it is 12.43%, but is 22.83% for No Party voters. Despite the lower turnout of No Party voters they tend to determine the outcome of Iowa elections because of the near parity of voters in the two major parties.

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Updates

Unlike most academic papers I plan to update the data for this paper as elections occur. Data updates lead to changes in the text as well. Below is a list of the updates as they occur.

- December 2013: initial release; fixed some typos after posting
- January 2014: addition to title
- March 2015: update to include 2014 election data; two minor corrections; link updates
- February 2017: addition of 2016 election data; extension of data back to 1982 with significant changes to the text; format change for Figure 1
- April 2019: addition of 2018 election data and related changes to text
- May 2021: addition of 2020 election data and related changes to text

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In this paper I examine Iowa's turnout statistics in midterm and presidential elections since 1982.¹ As with other papers in the Iowa Voting Series² my focus is on the statistics involved rather than theorizing about the reasons for particular turnout percentages. Nevertheless, the goal of this paper, like others in the series, is to examine aspects of voting in Iowa with an eye to future elections. This is important because it will provide some background and context to discussions about Iowa voters.

Data

Data for this examination were gathered from the Election Results & Statistics page of the Iowa Secretary of State's website.³ This page provides links to election results for a variety of primary and general election contests in Iowa, including those for presidential and midterm elections. The turnout statistics examined here are obtained from the Statewide Statistical Reports links.⁴ The information in these reports is broken out by sex and party as well as by age group. Since 1988, the number who voted absentee for each subgroup is also indicated.⁵

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

² 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.)

³ Election results and statistics from 2000 to the present can be found at <http://sos.iowa.gov/elections/results/index.html>. Results for earlier elections can be found at <https://sos.iowa.gov/elections/results/archive.html>.

⁴ For example, the turnout statistics for the 2000 presidential election can be found at <http://sos.iowa.gov/elections/pdf/2000StateWithLinnDemo.pdf>. On February 8, 2017, an article in the *Des Moines Register* indicated that 5,842 absentee ballots in Dallas County went unreported in the 2016 election. The article seems to indicate that the missing ballots did not affect turnout statistics, only vote totals in the various races.

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

General Election Turnout

The solid portion of the bars in Figure 1a represents the number of Iowa voters who voted in general elections from 1982 to 2020.⁶ This period covers 10 presidential elections and 10 midterm elections. The patterned portion of the bars represents the number of registered voters who did not vote in that election. The combined height of the bars represents the total number of registered voters. Except for slight declines in the mid to late 1980s when Iowa was losing population, and a few more for midterm elections after adjustments of the voter rolls (2002, 2014, and 2018), the number of registered voters in Iowa has slowly but steadily increased in the 38-year period.⁷

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

As shown in Figure 1b the turnout percentage for the elections has been fairly consistent, though there is a clear difference between presidential and midterm years. The turnout in presidential elections has varied between 71.16% (2016) and 86.01% (1992). Although the turnout for midterm elections has also varied within a similar range of about 15 points (a low of 52.71% in 2006 and a high of 67.48% in 1982), that range is substantially below the range for presidential elections. The average turnout in presidential years is 75.63%, but only 58.55% in midterm years. Those who follow politics are well aware of the much lower turnout for midterm elections, but it is worth knowing just how substantial the difference is. This is particularly true in a state that is fairly evenly balanced between the two major parties. More specifically, knowing who turns out, particularly in midterm elections, can aid parties and candidates in their get out the vote (GOTV) efforts.

⁶ It is a bit inconvenient for readers, but to make the figures larger I will put them at the end of the paper rather than within the text.

⁷ See the first paper in the series, titled "Iowa Voting Series, Paper 1: An Empirical Examination of Iowa Voter Registration Statistics Since 2000" for more details (<http://www.profhagle.com/papers/iowa-voting-series>).

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

⁹ See the United States Elections Project at <http://www.electproject.org/home/voter-turnout/voter-turnout-data>. Click on the links to see results for elections since 2000.

In looking at the percentages in Figure 1b there is a distinct break following the 1994 midterm election. The three presidential elections prior to 1994 (1984, 1988, and 1992) were three of the five highest percentages for presidential years. In addition, the turnout percentage in the first four midterm elections (1982, 1986, 1990, and 1994) were all higher than any of the next five. (The 2018 midterm broke this pattern by being higher than the 1986 percentage.) Following the 1994 midterm the percentages for each type of election were substantially below the prior portion of the period and within a narrower range.

Notice also that there is a similar break in registrations following 1994 as seen in Figure 1a. Prior to 1994 the registrations hovered very near about 1.6 million registered voters. After 1994 there were sharp increases in the number of registrants for the rest of the 1990s, and again following the 2002 election. What seemed to be happening was that increases in registered voters resulted in decreases in voter turnout. The most likely explanation is that the efforts of the political parties and affiliated groups to register as many Iowans as possible ended up registering more voters who were less interested in casting ballots.

Figure 2 shows the number of Iowans registered as Democrat, Republican, or No Party (Iowa's name for independents) as of the date of each election.¹⁰ For all but one election since 1998 No Party registrants have been more numerous than those of either party. Because of the pandemic in 2020, prior to the June primary an absentee ballot request form was sent to every voter. All a No Party voter had to do to switch his or her party registration was to request a Democrat or Republican primary ballot. That resulted in the sharp drop in No Party registrants and the corresponding increases for Democrats and Republicans.

The advantage between Democrats and Republicans has varied since 1982, with Democrats having the lead at the beginning of the period, Republicans taking the lead in 1994, Democrats retaking the lead in 2006 and expanding it greatly for 2008. The parties essentially returned to parity in 2012, with the Republicans opening a small lead in 2014 and for the next three elections.

¹⁰ With one exception, the Statewide Statistical Reports on which the data for this paper were based only include party data for Democrats, Republicans, and No Party voters. This is unlike the monthly voter registration reports which also include data for the Green and Libertarian Parties (when they were recognized political parties in Iowa) and an Other category for Non-Party Political Organizations (currently the Green and Libertarian Parties). The one exception is the 2018 Report that included Libertarians as a separate category. The 2002 Report did not include a category for the Green Party, which was officially recognized for that election. The Reports do include voters in the Green and Libertarian Parties or the Other category in totals for sex and age group, but, for purposes of this paper they will not be included in examinations that include a party component. Again, see the first paper in the series for more details (<http://www.profhagle.com/papers/iowa-voting-series>).

As in Figures 1a and 1b, Figure 2 shows there to be a dramatic change in voter registrations beginning in 1994. Registrations for the two major parties remained fairly steady through 2006, but for No Party voters 1994 was the start of a sharp increase in registrations over the next six years. During that six year period No Party voter registrations went from 470,428 to 729,437. That represents an increase of 55.1% in a fairly short period of time.

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

Figure 3 shows the turnout percentage for Democrats, Republicans, and No Party voters in midterm and presidential elections since 1982. As indicated in Figure 1b, we can clearly see that the sharp drop in turnout for midterm elections affects Democrats, Republicans, and No Party voters. Unlike Democrats and Republicans, however, the drop in turnout is much more substantial for No Party voters.

Although Republicans always had a higher turnout percentage, with three exceptions, the turnout percentages of the two major parties track very closely in both presidential and midterm election years. Between 1982 and 1992 the difference in turnout between Democrats and Republicans was usually between three and five points, with exceptions for 1988 and 1992 where the difference was less than a point. A gap of nearly 10 points opened in 1994. The difference for the next several elections remained larger than it had been pre-1994, but slowly narrowed so that between 2004 and 2008 it was between two and three points. The next large difference in turnout between the two major parties came in 2010 when Republican turnout was 12.5% higher than that of Democrats. As in the presidential year election following 1994, Democrats narrowed the gap in 2012. Unlike the post-1994 period where the gap continued to narrow, Republican turnout was over 11.5% higher than that of Democrats in 2014. Although the gap narrowed again for 2016, the difference was still just under 7%, which was the largest gap for a presidential election. The turnout gap between Democrats and Republicans narrowed again in 2018 to 3.88%. For 2020 it expanded slightly to 4.17%.

Just as Republicans always had a higher turnout percentage than Democrats, No Party voters always had a lower turnout percentage than either of the two parties. There was more variability in the turnout of No Party voters prior to 1994. The gap between them and Democrats was relatively small in 1984 and 1992, but much larger in 1988 and the midterm elections during this period. In 1994 there was a huge drop in turnout from the high of almost 81% in 1992 to just 45.54%. From 1994 on the No Party turnout in

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

presidential years was not as high as it had been previously and the turnout in midterm years was consistently lower than it had been. In fact, the five lowest turnout percentages – all below 40% – for No Party voters occurred in the five midterm elections from 1998 to 2014.

An additional comment about the 2018 midterms is worthwhile. As noted in the prior paragraphs, turnout in 2018 was higher than it had been in quite some time. In Figure 1b we saw that the overall 2018 midterm turnout of 60.81% was the highest it had been since 1994 (62.98%), and even higher than 1986 (59.73%). Moreover, this surge was seen for all three parties. Republicans, who generally have the highest midterm turnout, had a turnout of 71.60% in 2018, which was higher than any midterm since 1994 (75.06%). Similarly, the Democrats' 2018 midterm turnout of 67.72%, which reduced the midterm percentage gap with Republicans from the prior two midterms by over two-thirds, was the highest since 1990. Even No Party voters, who had midterm turnouts below 40% since 1998, had a 2018 turnout of 45.90%, their highest since 1990 (51.61%).

Interestingly, the surge in turnout percentage for 2018 was followed by a similar surge for 2020. At 85.04%, the turnout percentage for Republicans was the highest since 1992. For Democrats (80.87%) and No Party voters (64.46%) it was the second highest since 1992 with only 2004 being slightly higher for each party.

Having made an initial examination of these turnout statistics, there are two additional points to consider regarding the turnout differences between Democrats and Republicans: enthusiasm and the number of registered voters.

Enthusiasm

Many speak of the enthusiasm of the base (meaning core members of the party) as an important factor in an election.¹² The assumption is that if the base is less enthusiastic or energized some will be less likely to vote. This seems to have had only a minor effect on Republican turnout in Iowa.

Looking at presidential elections first, there are four basic types to consider: those for each party after a president's first term and those for each party after a president has served two terms.

In Figure 3 we see that Republican turnout ranged from a low of 80.03% in 1988 to a high of 88.74% in 1992, notably with the same candidate, George H. W. Bush. The seven presidential elections after 1992 had an even narrower range between 80.07% in 2008

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

and 85.04% in 2020. Despite these narrow ranges, the variations did seem to follow general expectations for presidential years.

In general we can expect that the base will be enthusiastic about reelecting a president of their party and this seemed to be the case for Republicans as they had their highest turnouts of the period in 1984 (86.96%), 1992 (88.74%), 2004 (83.77%) and 2020 (85.04%). Of course, one could argue that a party's base should be energized when attempting to defeat a president of the other party running for reelection. This was basically true for Iowa Republicans in 2012 when their turnout percentage of 82.22% was the fifth highest of the 10 presidential elections in this period. On the other hand, Republican turnout in 1996 was 81.12%, which was only seventh highest.

It is often more difficult for the base to be excited after eight years of their party holding the presidency. It was no surprise then that 1988 (80.03%) and 2008 (80.07%) proved to be the low points for Republicans in presidential elections during this period. Although Republicans in 1988 did not seem as disheartened at the end of the Reagan presidency as they did at the end of George W. Bush's presidency in 2008, in both instances there seemed to be a lessening in enthusiasm for the Republican candidate in the following election, George H. W. Bush and John McCain, respectively.

Conversely, after eight years of a president of the opposing party we should expect base voters to be enthusiastic about an opportunity to retake the White House. For Republicans this opportunity occurred in the 2000 and 2016 elections, but the turnout in these two elections was in the middle of the 10 presidential elections. In looking at the results of the 2000 election some have argued that a number of Republican voters in Iowa did not vote because they did not feel George W. Bush was sufficiently conservative. That may have been the case, but the Republican turnout percentage in 2000 was 81.26%, which was slightly higher than that of 1996 (81.12%) and 2008 (80.07%) and only a bit lower than 2004 and 2012 (83.77% and 82.22%, respectively). On the other hand, given that Al Gore won Iowa in 2000 by only 4,144 votes even a 1% increase in Republican turnout would have made a difference. At 80.95%, turnout for Iowa Republicans in 2016 was the third lowest of the 10 elections. Although this is somewhat surprising coming off eight years of the Obama presidency, as the Republican nominee Donald Trump likely had a lot to do with the lower turnout. Although Trump's core supporters were very enthusiastic for him, many in the base Republican party were less so.

Aside from the general drop in turnout in midterm elections, there is a general expectation that the president's party will lose seats in Congress.

In the ten midterm elections the average drop in turnout for Iowa Republicans was 12.43%, down to 70.58%. In terms of the variation, it is not surprising that the lowest turnout was in 2006 (64.89%), the sixth year of George W. Bush's presidency.

Republican turnout in 1986, the sixth year of Ronald Reagan's presidency, was also fairly low, but along with 2006 there were three elections that had even lower turnout (1998, 2010, and 2014) and one that was less than a point higher (2002). What is a bit surprising is that the turnout percentage was a bit lower in 2010 than in 2002. It was clear that 2010 was going to be a strong year for Republicans and the base was certainly energized, but the turnout percentage was about 1% below that of 2002. Two reasons Republicans in 2002 may have been a bit more energized than expected are that it was the first post-9/11 election and the defection of Senator Jim Jeffords of Vermont from the Republican Party in 2001 that returned control of the Senate to the Democrats.

The highest turnout for Republicans in the midterm elections was in 1994 at 75.06%. This is not surprising as this was widely recognized as a "wave" year for Republicans. It is interesting, however, that the Republican wave years of 2010 and 2014 have much lower turnout percentages at 68.98% and 68.20% respectively. What these three wave elections have in common is that they are also the elections with the three largest gaps in turnout between Democrats and Republicans.

Regardless of the reasons, it seems that enthusiasm of the Republican base is a factor in turnout in midterm years, but, as in presidential years, not a major one. That seems to help explain the Republican turnout in 2014. Although the enthusiasm level just did not seem to be as high in 2014 as it was in 2010, turnout was down less than a percent at 68.20%.

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

The range for Democrats in presidential years was larger than that of Republicans. Iowa Democrats had a low of 73.96% in 2016 and a high of 87.97% in 1992. That range is about five points wider than that of Republicans and their average for the period at 79.63% is about three points lower.

There are three points to highlight in these figures. The first is that the four presidential elections with the highest turnout for Iowa Democrats were 1984 (83.77%), 1992 (87.97%), 2004 (81.82%), and 2020 (80.87%). Although the turnout for these four elections was consistent with Republican turnout in those years, the circumstances were different. While Republicans were defending an incumbent president, Democrats were seeking to unseat a president of the other party. Both situations have a tendency to energize the base voters and although the turnout for Democrats did not exceed that of Republicans, 1984, 1992, and 2004 were three of the five elections where the gap between the two parties was the smallest.

The second point to highlight is the Democrats' 2008 turnout. After eight years of a Republican president and a poor economy and with anti-war sentiment running high it

would seem that 2008 should have been when Democrats had their highest turnout. Not surprisingly, it was the second lowest presidential year turnout for the Republicans, but only fifth highest for the Democrats. One explanation may be that the enthusiasm generated by the 2008 Iowa Caucuses which produced a sharp increase in registered Democrats had waned somewhat by election time.

The third point to highlight is the slight reduction in turnout for Iowa Democrats in both 1996 and 2012. As noted before, we might expect the party base to be energized when their incumbent president is up for reelection, but factors in both elections seemed to dampen enthusiasm and turnout. In 1996, although the turnout for both Republicans and Democrats was down from 1992, that of Democrats was down more. As much as Democrats were supportive of Bill Clinton in the face of various Republican political attacks on him, enthusiasm was certainly not as high as it had been in 1992. As for 2012, a somewhat weak economy along with other factors made it a more difficult election for Democrats than might have been expected. In short, for some the potential of Obama's presidency in 2008 did not become the reality of 2012. Nevertheless, the Obama campaign recognized the reduction in enthusiasm and worked very hard on their turnout efforts to minimize the damage. Their efforts proved successful in that the Democrats' 2012 turnout, though the third lowest of the 10 presidential elections, was enough for Obama to win Iowa.

The Democrats' turnout in midterm election years is roughly similar to that of Republicans with three major exceptions in 1994, 2010, and 2014. All three of these elections were considered wave years for Republicans. Although the turnout for Republicans in 1994 was at its second highest for a midterm election during the period, their turnout for 2010 and 2014 was much lower. Thus, a major factor that made these three elections wave years for Republicans was the gap in turnout between the two parties.

At 65.17% the turnout for Democrats in 1994 was actually their fifth highest of the period. What created the gap between Democrats and Republicans was the fact that 1994 was the second highest turnout for Republicans. In 2010 and 2014 Democrats had their lowest two midterm election turnout percentages at 56.48% and 56.66%, respectively. Again, although Republicans did not have particularly good turnout in these two elections, because turnout for Democrats was at their lowest levels, gaps of over 11 and a half points existed for each election.

Both 2006 and 2010 were considered wave election years, the former for Democrats and the latter for Republicans. Although Republicans were unenthusiastic about their prospects in 2006, and had their lowest midterm election turnout that year, the drop from other midterm years was only about five and a half points from the average of the other nine. In contrast, Democrats' turnout in 2010, a year in which they were unenthusiastic, was nearly ten points below the average in the seven prior midterms.

Of course, comparing turnout for the two parties' voters in two different elections is not indicative of the results for any particular election. That is where examining the gap in turnout for a particular election can be particularly important.

As we have already seen, the turnout gap between Democrats and Republicans was much larger in 2010 than 2006, but having said that I should note that Democrats picked up two of Iowa's then-five US House seats in 2006 (one open and previously held by a Republican, the other by beating an incumbent Republican) but Republicans did not take any back in 2010. Iowa Republicans did, however, make significant gains in state races in 2010, including the Governor and Secretary of State offices as well as the majority in the state House and gains in the state Senate. It was almost a surprise that Democrats' turnout percentage was up even if only very slightly in 2014 given that it was a second term midterm for their party. As noted above, the second term midterm is usually a time when the enthusiasm of the incumbent party is starting to wane. Given that Democrats' turnout was up slightly and that of Republicans was down slightly, it allowed Democrats to narrow the turnout gap about a point from 2010. Nevertheless, Republicans ended up having a good year electorally in 2014 in that they held onto one open Congressional seat, picked up another open seat, and picked up the open US Senate seat.

Many thought 2018 would be a wave election year for Democrats. This was due to a combination of factors mostly centered on intense anti-Trump energy among Democrats. Republicans seemed somewhat split between Trump supporters on one side and a combination of absolute Never-Trumpers and those who voted for him but were not happy with his personal behavior on the other. Nevertheless, the overall feel of the campaign leading up to the election just did not seem like it was shaping up to be a wave year to me. In terms of results, Democrats did retake the US House and flipped about 40 seats, so that might fit a definition of a wave. In Iowa, however, the results were, once again, mixed. Although Democrats ousted two incumbent US House Republicans in IA01 and IA03, as well as the State Auditor, they lost three other state-wide races (Governor, Secretary of State, and Agriculture Secretary) and failed to retake either chamber in the state legislature. As noted previously, turnout was certainly up for Democrats in 2018, over five and a half points higher, in fact, than their wave year of 2006. At the same time, however, turnout was also up for Republicans, who were likely energized by the fight over Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh which concluded only a month before the election. Republican enthusiasm, along with that of No Party voters whose turnout was also up, likely diluted the effects of the higher turnout for Democrats.

Turnout in Relation to Registered Voters

Considering turnout percentages is important, but they must be looked at in relation to a party's voter registration numbers. The clearest way to illustrate this may be to use

the 2008 figures. For the 2008 election Republicans had 613,656 registered voters. Of those, 491,342 (80.07%) voted. As shown in Figure 3, that turnout percentage was a bit higher than the Democrats' turnout, which was 78.20%. Nevertheless, Figure 2 shows that for the 2008 election Democrats had a decided lead in registered voters. More specifically, the 78.20% turnout meant that of 726,795 registered Democrats, 568,377 voted. Thus, Democrats effectively had a built in lead of roughly 77,000 votes.¹³

Having used the 2000 election as an example above, let me do so again here. In 2000 Republicans had their largest voter registration advantage of the 10 presidential elections. That year 456,664 of the 561,963 registered Republicans voted (81.26%). In contrast, 411,920 of the 534,059 registered Democrats voted (77.13%). The larger number of registered voters and higher turnout rate gave Republicans an initial advantage of nearly 45,000 votes (but see below for more on this).

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

There are two points worth making here. The first is that although one party might have an advantage based on a combination of voter registration and turnout percentage, it does not guarantee victory. As noted previously, Democrat Al Gore won Iowa in 2000 despite the Republican voter registration advantage and higher turnout rate that year. In round numbers, Gore received about 50,000 more votes from No Party voters which allowed him a narrow victory in Iowa.¹⁴

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

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

¹⁴ For more on the distribution of No Party voters see the paper entitled, "Iowa Voting Series, Paper 8: An examination of Iowa "No Party" Voter Distribution in General Elections Since 1982" (<http://www.profhagle.com/papers/iowa-voting-series>).

No Party Voters

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

As shown in Figure 2, No Party voters outnumbered those of either party from 1998 to 2018. It is interesting that the number of No Party voters was between those for Democrats and Republicans at the beginning of the period. Their numbers dropped in the late 1980s and remained below that of both parties from 1988 through 1994. The 1996 election saw a very sharp increase of more than one hundred thousand No Party voters. That was followed in 1998 by another jump of over seventy thousand voters. From 1998 to 2018 only the Democrats came close to the number of No Party voters, and that was only for the 2008 election when they pulled within forty thousand registered voters.

Again, the sharp drop in No Party voters for the 2020 election was due to a major shift prior to the 2020 June primary when every voter was mailed an absentee ballot request form. No Party voters who requested a primary ballot automatically had their party registration changed to that party. This reduced the number of No Party voters below that for both parties for the first time since 1994. Even so, in the months following the initial reduction, the number of No Party voters increased quickly enough so that by April, 2021 the active voter gap with Democrats had been reduced from 47,969 to only 10,538. It is likely that No Party numbers will eventually return to being above those of Democrats and Republicans, but even if they do not state-wide elections in Iowa will still be determined by their votes.

There are several reasons why a voter may choose to register as No Party rather than as a Democrat or Republican. The simplest reason is that the person is ideologically between the two parties in terms of the issues he or she cares about. On the other hand, some voters may be sufficiently to the extreme left or right that they do not want to be associated with either party. Some may not be particularly interested in politics in general but still feel it is their civic duty to vote so they register No Party. A few Iowa voters register as No Party in the false hope that it will cut down on calls and mailings during caucus season.¹⁵ Some, such as business owners, may just want to appear neutral, particularly in a county that may be dominated by one party or the other.

¹⁵ The Iowa Caucuses are party events, meaning one must be a registered Democrat or Republican to attend. One can, however, register or reregister for the appropriate party as late as the night of the

Despite the importance of No Party voters in determining the outcome of elections in Iowa, Figure 3 shows that they have a much lower turnout rate than either of the two parties. In presidential years, the average No Party turnout is 65.25%, over 14% less than Democrats and over 17% less than Republicans. For midterm elections the drop off for No Party voters is much steeper than for Democrats or Republicans. The average turnout percentage for No Party voters in the ten midterm elections is 42.42%, which is 22.83% below their average in the 10 presidential elections. In contrast, the average midterm drop off for Democrats is 15.39% and that of Republicans is 12.43%.

In presidential elections turnout for No Party voters ranged from a low of 57.04% in 1996 to a high of 80.86% in 1992. This spread of over 23 points is much larger than that of Democrats (14.01%) or Republicans (8.71%). In the midterm elections the turnout for No Party voters ranged from a low of 34.23% in 1998 to a high of 54.41% in 1982. Again, that spread of over 20 points was larger than that of either Democrats (16.13%) or Republicans (10.82%).

As a follow up point to No Party voting in midterm elections, although their 45.90% turnout in 2018 was only the third highest behind 1982 (54.41%) and 1990 (51.61%), it was the highest percentage since the surge in No Party voter registrations that occurred after 1994.

In looking at the turnout percentages for No Party voters in Figure 3 notice the distinct change in the pattern after the 1994 election. From 1996 on the pattern is much more consistent and the high and low differences within presidential and midterm elections are much narrower until 2018. Recall from Figure 2 that there was a significant increase in the number of voters registered as No Party between 1994 and 1998. Given the overall decrease in No Party turnout percentages at the same time, it seems reasonable to conclude that many of the newly registered No Party voters were not all that interested in voting. One possible explanation for the consistency of the turnout rate for No Party voters in either presidential or midterm elections after 1996 is that there is a core group of voters who are sufficiently interested in the political process to vote, but nevertheless choose not to identify with either of the major parties.

On the other hand, the notion of a core group of No Party voters who are more interested in voting might not fit with the increased turnout for the 2020 presidential election. The sharp drop in No Party voters who chose to participate in the 2020 primaries might have consisted of those who were sufficiently interested in a party's nominee to cast a ballot. If those who did so were also those more interested in politics

caucuses. Caucus candidates will look for supporters within their own party, but also No Party voters and even those who are eligible to vote but unregistered. Thus, No Party voters may end up being contacted by candidates for *both* parties.

generally, it might have led to a lower turnout for the remaining No Party voters. That was not the case, however, as No Party turnout in 2020 was the second highest since 1992.

Although the turnout rate for No Party voters is relatively low, particularly in midterm elections, it is still sufficient to determine election outcomes given the near parity between the two major parties. Consider the example of the race for Iowa governor in the 2006 midterm election year. Although Democrats held a voter registration advantage of just under 24,000, nearly 1,500 more Republicans voted. No Party turnout was at its second lowest that year (35.62%), but that still resulted in 273,094 voters casting ballots. The gubernatorial contest was won by Democrat Chet Culver by about 102,000 votes, suggesting that No Party voters broke for him by over 2-to-1. Four years later Democrats had an even larger advantage in voter registrations of over 51,000, but turned out 52,000 fewer voters than Republicans. In the 2010 gubernatorial race incumbent Democrat Culver ran against Republican former-Governor Terry Branstad and lost by about 108,000 votes. Although the Republican turnout advantage was substantial, the 281,546 No Party voters who turned out broke in favor of Branstad.¹⁶

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

Concluding Comments

Voter enthusiasm certainly plays a role in turnout. There is often a distinct “feel” regarding which party is more energized about their electoral prospects. Although the results here indicate that there did not seem to be major changes in turnout based on enthusiasm, or a lack thereof, even minor changes can be important in close elections or when the voters are as evenly divided politically as they are in Iowa.

The results also demonstrate that what causes enthusiasm or motivates voters was not based just on which party was defending an incumbent or which was trying to hold the White House for a third term. Along these lines, notice that the three elections with the highest turnout were 1992, 1984, and 2004, in that order for Democrats and No Party voters, and were the first, second, and fourth highest for Republicans. All three elections involved a Republican incumbent running for reelection. For Republicans, the high turnout seemed to fit conventional wisdom about being enthusiastic when supporting your candidate for a second term. That factor did not seem to weigh as

¹⁶ Again, for more details on No Party voter distributions see the eighth paper in the series (<http://www.profhagle.com/papers/iowa-voting-series>).

heavily for Democrats or we would have seen a higher turnout for them in 1996 and 2012. Of course, party affiliation of the incumbent would be of little or no interest to No Party voters. Thus, although enthusiasm centered around a voter's political affiliation may help to explain turnout, it is certainly not the only factor. At the very least, and especially for No Party voters, the specific candidates will be important. The 2016 election seems to be an example of this. With both the major party candidates having very low favorability ratings prior to the election, 2016 was the lowest presidential year turnout for Democrats and the third lowest for both Republicans and No Party voters.

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

There are various reasons for the drop in turnout in midterm elections. One factor usually mentioned is that midterm elections do not have the unifying figure of a presidential nominee at the top of the ticket. That is true, but it is more important that the money and organization that come with a presidential campaign are also absent. The additional money of a presidential campaign pays for much more media advertising, but also helps fund various grassroots activities, both of which increase interest and issue awareness among more marginal voters.¹⁷

The drop in turnout for midterm election years suggests a need to approach turnout differently in presidential and midterm years. Again, this is certainly no surprise given the different resources generally available. Campaigns in midterm election years must generally make do with fewer resources. Critical to such midterm election efforts is the understanding of the greater difficulty in turning out No Party voters, particularly those who at least seem willing to vote in presidential election years. This is where the trend of micro-targeting may become a critical factor.

Democrats are usually credited with having a better turnout operation than Republicans. It is interesting, therefore, that the turnout percentage for Republicans has been consistently higher. On the other hand, there is some suggestion in the data that Democrats may be doing a better job of reaching out to possible supporters within the group of No Party voters. As mentioned previously, the results in the 2006 gubernatorial election indicate No Party voters strongly favored Culver. In 2010, they favored Branstad, but not as heavily. Similar results for 2000 and 2004 suggest

¹⁷ Midterm wave elections often have a unifying theme that in some sense takes the place of a presidential candidate at the top of the ticket. The 1994 midterms had this with the "Contract with America." The midterms of 2006 and 2010 discussed here both had unifying themes as well. Although such unifying themes or issues may increase interest it tends to not increase the money available for GOTV efforts as much as a presidential campaign would.

Democrats may be doing a better job of identifying their supporters within the No Party voters. Iowa Republicans also work to engage No Party voters, but it appears their efforts need to be improved if they wish to effectively compete for the large block of No Party voters.

Figure 1a: Turnout numbers for Iowa Registered Voters in Elections Since 1982

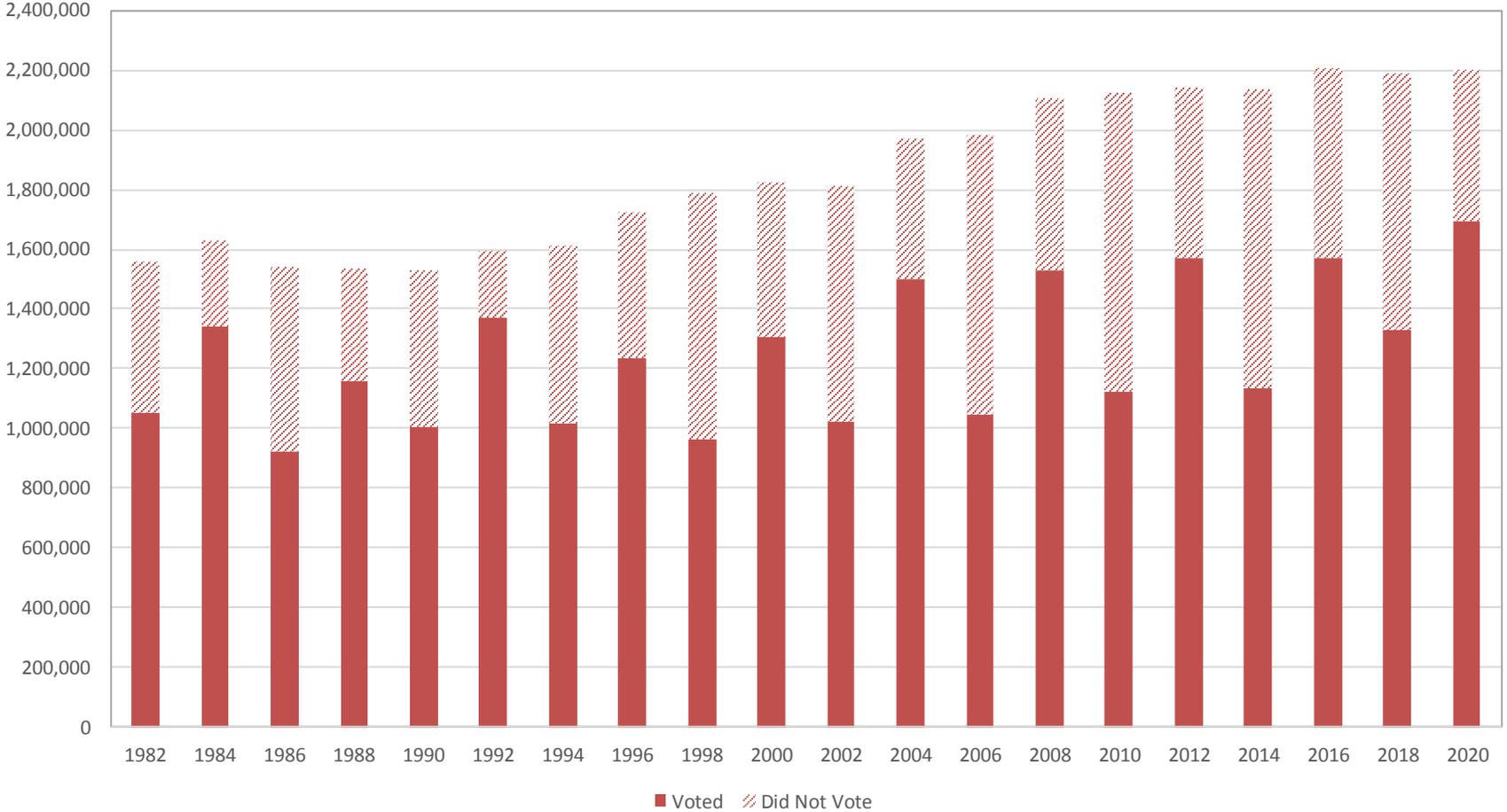


Figure 1b: Turnout Percentage of Iowa Registered Voters in Elections Since 1982

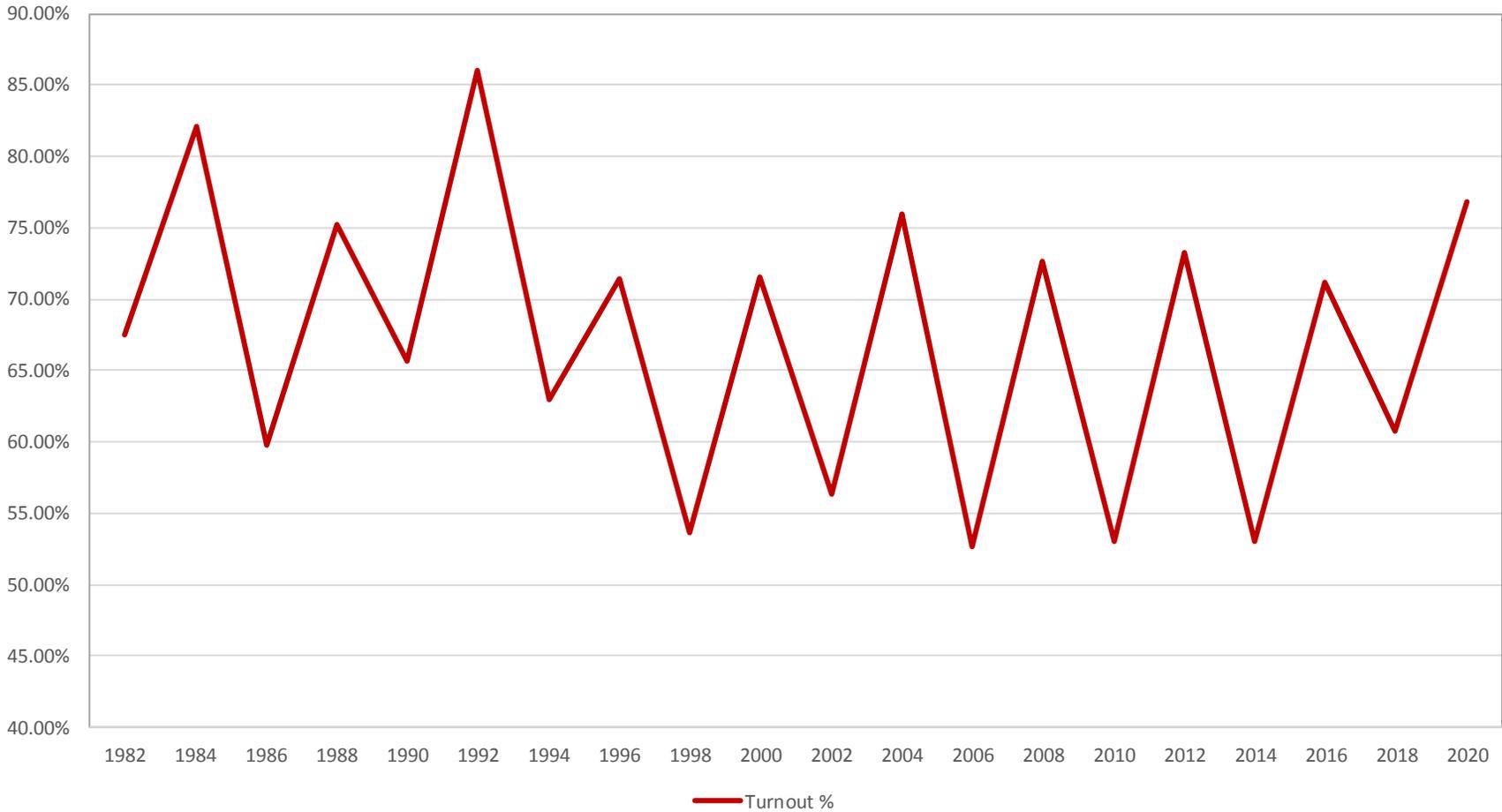


Figure 2: Iowa Registered Voters by Party in Election Years Since 1982

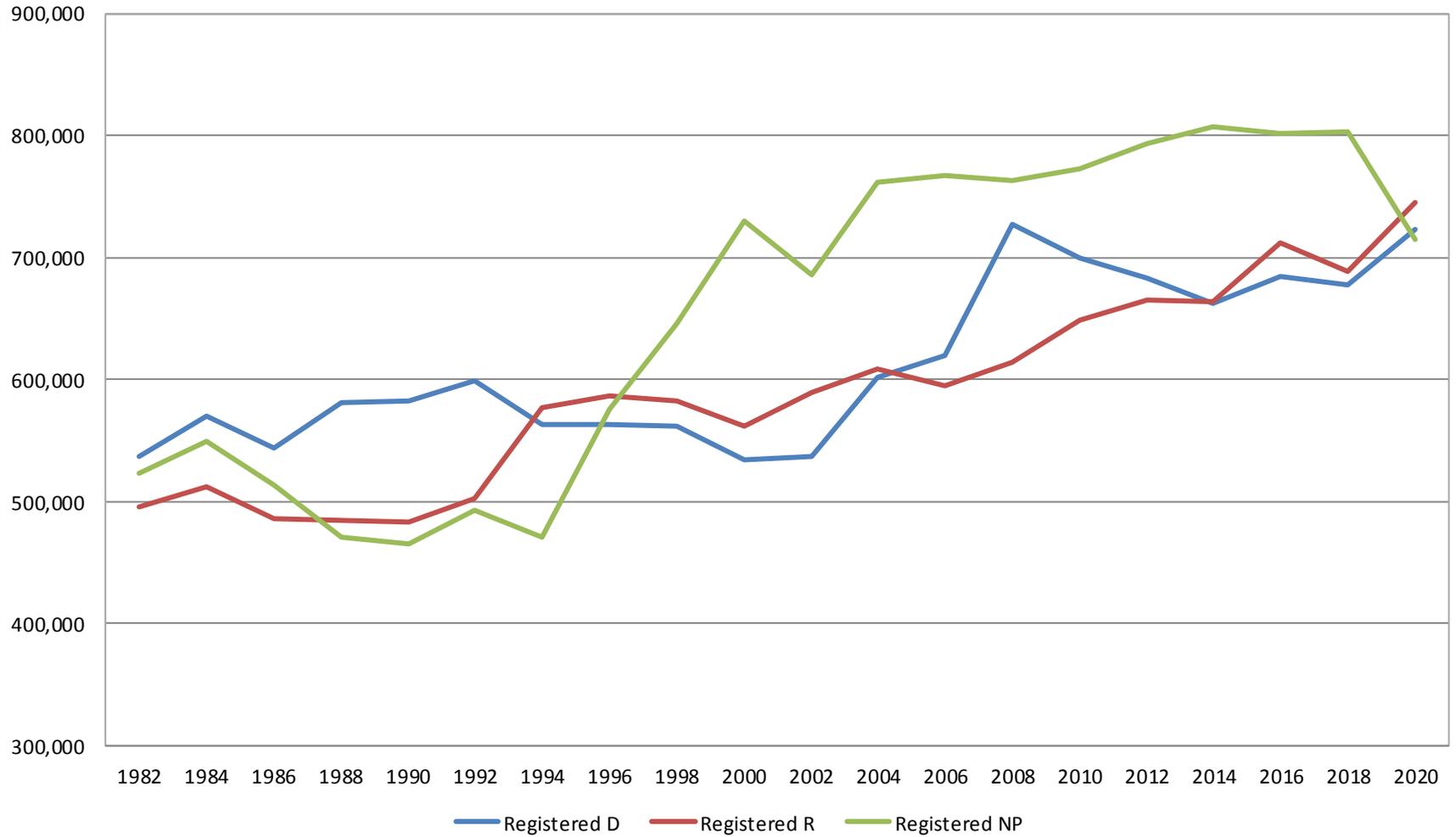


Figure 3: Iowa Voter Turnout Percentage by Party in Election Years Since 1982

