

Iowa Voting Series, Paper 6: An Examination of Iowa Absentee Voting Since 1988

© Timothy M. Hagle
Department of Political Science
The University of Iowa

Abstract

This is the sixth paper in a series examining aspects of voting in Iowa. In this paper I examine Iowa's absentee voting in presidential and midterm elections since 1988. The results show a trend for increased absentee voting in Iowa. The trend exists for both midterm and presidential elections, though the average percentage of absentee voting in midterm elections is below the average for presidential elections. In looking at various subgroups based on party, sex, and age group we see that Democrats are more likely to vote absentee than Republicans and women more so than men. Although there are some variations among the subgroups these general trends are fairly robust. The results for age groups are mixed in that the emphasis on both young voters (the 18-24 group) and older voters (the 65 & Over group) results in these two groups having the highest average percentages of absentee voting during the period. Nevertheless, because the turnout percentage of the 18-24 group is generally low, the proportion of this group among all absentee voters is still low. The results also showed the effect of GOTV efforts on the part of the parties and campaigns. The greater emphasis on absentee voting in presidential years is evident in the greater percentage of such votes compared to midterm elections.

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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 occurred.

- May 2014: Initial release
- May 2015: Update to include 2014 election data
- April 2017: addition of 2016 election data; extension of data back to 1988 with significant changes to the text; format changes for several figures; corrections to some figure titles after posting
- April 2019: addition of 2018 data and related changes to the text
- May 2021: addition of 2020 data and related changes to the text

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In the second paper in this series¹ I examined Iowa's turnout statistics in midterm and presidential elections since 1982, in general and by party.² In the third paper in the series I examined the turnout statistics by sex and party. In the fourth paper in the series I examined the turnout statistics by age group and party. In the fifth paper in the series I examined turnout by age group, sex, and party. In this paper I change focus a bit and will examine turnout in terms of absentee voting. 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 turnout statistics examined here are obtained from the Statewide Statistical Reports links.⁴ The information in these reports

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 turnout in "presidential elections" or "midterm elections" it is a shorthand way of referring to turnout 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 turnout statistics not from any particular contest except when a particular race is used as an example.

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. The article

is broken out by sex and party as well as by age group. For each subgroup, the number who voted absentee is also indicated. Unfortunately, although the archived Statewide Statistical Reports go back to the 1982 election, they do not include data on absentee voting until the 1988 election.

As in some prior papers, before proceeding I need to make an additional comment about the data for this paper. The information contained in the Statewide Statistical Reports links is not entirely complete with respect to party identification. The reports contain divisions for Democrat, Republican, and No Party voters,⁵ but do not include an “Other” category as they do for the registration statistics. In addition, the 2002 Report did not contain a category for the Green Party, which was official for that election, but did for the Libertarian Party for the 2018 election. Although this was not a problem for the 2000 through 2006 elections, for 2008 and beyond it means that the grand total of registrants and voters in any particular age group cannot be achieved by simply adding the Democrats, Republicans, and No Party voters in that age group. In the first paper in this series I simply added registrants in the Other category to No Party registrants. I cannot do that for this paper, however, as I have neither an exact count of such Other registrants on election day nor an indication of how many voted. Nevertheless, although this number varies from about one to a few thousand registrants or voters depending on the category or election, that number is small, relatively speaking, and I will only focus on the three main political affiliations.

Iowa Registered Voters

I begin by repeating Figures 1a and 1b from the second paper in the series.⁶ These figures show the number of registered Iowa voters and the turnout percentage in general elections from 1982 to 2020. This period covers 10 presidential elections and ten midterm elections. The height of the bars represents the total number of registered voters. Except for slight declines in the 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 increased in the last 38 years.⁷ Figure 1b shows that the turnout percentage for the elections has been relatively

seems to indicate that the missing ballots did not affect turnout statistics, only vote totals in the various races.

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 as I update this and later papers in the series I may sometimes use “party” to include No Party voters.

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 for more details. Interestingly, although 2012 was also a post-census adjustment year, the registration losses earlier in the year were made up by the time of the general election in November. As I mentioned in the fourth paper, this is an example how the resources available

steady, particularly after 1994, though there was 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 was 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, especially in midterm elections, can aid parties and candidates in their get out the vote (GOTV) efforts.

The second paper then examined turnout differences by party and found, in brief, that turnout for Republicans was consistently a few percentage points higher than that of Democrats for both midterm and presidential elections. In addition, turnout for both parties was several points lower in midterm elections. In contrast, turnout for No Party voters (what Iowa calls independents) was much lower than either Democrats or Republicans, particularly in midterm elections.

The third paper examined registration and turnout differences by sex and party and found that women outnumbered men as registered voters in all 20 elections examined. By party, there were clearly more women than men registered as Democrat or No Party for the entire period. The sex difference for Republican registrations was much smaller, with women ahead through 2002 and men taking a lead in 2004 and beyond. As for turnout, women had a higher turnout percentage than men in all 10 presidential elections regardless of party. For midterm elections the turnout percentages of men and women were much closer and were mixed to varying degrees among the three parties.

In the fourth paper I looked at registration and turnout statistics for the five age groups for which turnout statistics are reported (18-24, 25-34, 35-49, 50-64, and 65 & Over) along with party differences. The data confirmed conventional wisdom that older registrants are more likely to vote. In addition, the differences in turnout between presidential and midterm election years were reduced as voters aged. For the most part, party differences shown in prior papers were evident across age groups. More specifically, No Party voters had consistently lower turnout than Democrats or Republicans, and Republican turnout was usually a bit higher than that of Democrats.

In the fifth paper I examined registration and turnout statistics for subgroups based on age group, sex, and party. Some trends from prior papers persisted in the subgroups. Republican men and women tended to have the highest turnout percentages regardless

for get out the vote efforts in midterm (2002) versus presidential (2012) election years can make a difference.

of age group, but were closely followed by men and women Democrats. Men and women No Party voters were clearly below the turnout percentages of voters of either party. A general pattern of women having higher turnout percentages in presidential elections and men in midterm elections was fairly persistent across age groups and parties.

As I mentioned in the third paper, it is worth noting 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 use the number registered to vote. How many Iowans are not registered, regardless of eligibility, is a separate matter.⁸ I am also not considering how Iowa compares to other states in terms of turnout.

Absentee Voting in Iowa

Having examined registration and turnout for several subgroups of Iowa voters, in this paper I turn to a particular type of turnout: absentee voting. 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 excuse to cast an absentee ballot. One such excuse was, as the name suggests, that the voter would be absent from his or her regular voting location on Election Day. Legitimate excuses 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.⁹ 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 with two main exceptions. The first is that once a ballot is filled out it is placed in a security envelope which is then stored until Election Day when the envelope is opened and the ballot counted. The second

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 likely to be more interested in the political process and therefore more likely to vote, on average, than those who are not yet registered. Identifying and registering those who are eligible is an additional process that requires treatment separate from the focus of this paper.

⁹ Here is a link to Iowa’s Johnson County Auditor’s webpage for requesting a mailed absentee ballot: https://www.johnson-county.com/dept_auditor_elections.aspx?id=22232. The actual request form is a pdf that should pop-up or request to be opened.

difference is that the early voting does not take place at one's regular polling place. There are two basic locations for early voting. The first is in-person at the county auditor's office.¹⁰ Such in-person voting in Iowa began about six weeks before Election Day in elections through 2016. Beginning with the 2018 election the time for early voting was reduced from 40 to 29 days.¹¹ The second is at a "satellite early voting station." Such satellite voting stations are smaller versions of regular voting stations, but voters of 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 polling 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 polling stations. This may not be surprising given that county auditors 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 polling 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 for requesting a mailed ballot is now is 15 days before a general election.¹² As most who watch election returns know, there is some variation among the states as to the limit when mailed ballots can be counted. Some require that the mailed ballot actually be received by Election Day. Others allow the mailed ballot to be counted if it is postmarked by the day before the election. In Iowa, ballots returned by mail can be counted as long as they

¹⁰ 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, it is the Secretary of State who 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.

¹¹ Because of the pandemic in 2020 it seems that some ballots were sent and received well beyond the new limit. See Paper 10 in the series for details. Other aspects of the law that reduced the time for early voting, specifically the voter identification requirements, did not take effect until elections in 2019.

¹² See the Iowa Secretary of State's website:

<https://sos.iowa.gov/elections/electioninfo/absenteeinfo.html>.

are postmarked or bar coded by the day before the election even if received a few days later.¹³

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.¹⁴ Tracking absentee ballot requests has become sufficiently popular that, as noted above, the Iowa Secretary of State now includes reports for Absentee Ballot Statistics among its posted election information. The reasonable assumption is that voters 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, but the lead amassed by Democrats as a result of their early voting efforts on behalf of President

¹³ The Johnson County Auditor used to have this warning on its website: "In recent years, to save costs, the [United States] Postal Service has discontinued postmarks on local mail. If your ballot is received after Election Day and has no postmark, it cannot be counted." The current law allows for bar codes or other proof that the mailed ballot entered the federal postal system by the day before the election. Also, in Iowa absentee ballots mailed to voters can also be returned in person at the county auditor's office on Election Day before the polls close. See Iowa Code Chapters 53.17 and 53.17A.

¹⁴ For example, the absentee statistics for the 2014 election can be found at <http://sos.iowa.gov/elections/pdf/2014/general/absenteestats.pdf>. I examine these daily statistics in the tenth paper in the series. The eleventh paper in this series examines absentee and early voting in Johnson County.

Obama was too much to overcome.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶

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 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.

Let me make two additional points before turning to an examination of the available data. First, 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 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.

Second, because of the pandemic in 2020 and the need to minimize a wide variety of in-person activities, including voting, there was a huge push to get more voters to use mailed ballots. As noted in prior papers, the Iowa Secretary of State mailed every voter and absentee ballot request form for the June primary.¹⁷ This was a trial run of sorts and it was repeated for the general election. As a result, and as described below, there was a huge spike in the number of absentee ballots cast in the 2020 general election.

Turning to the absentee voter data, Figures 2a and 2b show the number and percentage of Iowa voters who cast regular and absentee ballots in election years since 1988. The total height of each bar in Figure 2a represents the total voters and, as discussed in prior

¹⁵ See, for example, <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/dec/06/news/la-pn-obama-early-voting-key-victory-20121205>.

¹⁶ See, for example, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/upshot/north-carolina-early-vote-tracker.html>.

¹⁷ In addition to the Iowa Secretary of State, some County Auditors mailed absentee ballot request forms to their voters. The state party organizations and some other groups did so as well. I received at least six such request forms for the general election.

papers, clearly indicates the drop in turnout for midterm elections compared to presidential elections. (The total height of the bars in Figure 2a is equal to the height of the solid portion of the bars for the corresponding elections in Figure 1a.) The red portion at the top of each bar represents the number who voted absentee.

There are three points to make about the percentages shown in Figure 2b. The first is that the line is relatively smooth through 2004. At that point we begin to see substantial differences between midterm and presidential elections. In three of the four midterms prior to 2006 the percentage of absentee voters actually increased from the percentage in the prior presidential election (the exception being 1998). That changed for 2006 when the percentage dropped to 21.52% from its high of 31.72% in 2004. Despite that large drop, the percentage again surged to a new high of 35.70% in 2008. The midterm drop in 2010 was much smaller than that for 2006 at only 3.67%. Another new high was reached for 2012 at 43.20%. The midterm drop for 2014 was smaller than the previous two midterms at only 2.22%. Given the small midterm drop for 2014 some thought that the presidential year of 2016 might see absentee voting cross the 50% mark for the first time. This was not to be, however, as the percentage was only 41.31%, which was actually below the 2012 percentage and at 0.33% the smallest presidential year gain over the prior midterm for the period. The drop in the 2018 midterm percentage from 2016 was smaller than the three previous midterm drops at only 1.02%, though that was enough to place it slightly below the percentage for 2014.

The second thing to notice about these percentages is that they are generally increasing and doing so at a faster rate than the increases in turnout. For example, 30,974 more Iowans voted in 2008 than 2004, but the increase in absentee voting was 85,680. The difference between 2012 and 2008 was even greater where the increase in turnout was 43,483 but the increase in absentee voting was 133,379. There was also a substantial increase in the percentage of absentee voting in midterm elections. The midterm-to-midterm percentage increased in every election except 2006 and 2018. In 2006 the percentage of absentee voting actually decreased from 2002 even though the number of voters increased. This is a bit of a puzzle given that 2006 was a very good year for Democrats and they are known to be better at getting their base to vote absentee than Republicans. I will examine this more closely when we look at various subgroups below. The percentage from 2014 to 2018 was also down, though only slightly at 0.69% (40.29% in 2018 versus 40.98% in 2014). Even so, there were actually 70,616 more voters who voted absentee in 2018 than 2014. That increase in the number of absentee voters was not reflected in the percentage, however, because turnout was also up by 194,792 voters in 2018 over 2014.

The third thing to notice is the spike for 2020. Because of the efforts to get voters to cast a mailed ballot there was a dramatic increase in the number of absentee ballots. The increase in percentage from 40.29% in 2018 to 58.86% in 2020 was the largest midterm to presidential increase in the period charted. Interestingly, however, if you imagine a

straight line from 1988 through 2004, then connecting the points for 2008 and 2012, and extending beyond it would come very close to the 2020 percentage. As mentioned previously, Iowa seemed to be on track to break the 50% mark in 2016, but ended up falling short. Had the usual increase occurred for 2016 the percentage in 2020 would not seem so unusual.

On the whole, and despite the 2016 and 2018 percentages, there was a clear trend of an increasing percentage of voters who voted absentee. These increases likely resulted from a combination of changes in the law, increased efforts to get people to vote early, and a greater acceptance of casting early ballots on the part of the public. Despite the unusual circumstances for it, the 2020 percentage more or less restored the trend line. In a previous version of this paper I noted that the 2014 to 2018 values were all within a percentage point just over 40% and wondered whether we might have reached a saturation point regarding absentee voting. I suggested that we might consider the 2016 absentee percentage an anomaly based on the specific candidates, so the 2020 figure would be telling. It certainly was, but mainly because of the unusual circumstances. It will be interesting to see the extent the absentee percentage drops in the 2022 midterm and whether there will be another increase for 2024. Even though some who never voted absentee before did so in 2020, the question is whether they will do so again in future elections. They might, but changes to make Election Day voting easier or concerns about “October surprises” might still inhibit some voters to switch to absentee voting.¹⁸

I now begin an examination of absentee voting by political party, sex, and age group.

Absentee Voting by Party

As I begin an examination of the absentee voting data for various groups and subgroups, I must note that there are two ways of looking at the data. One way is to examine the percentage of absentee voting within a particular group and a second is to compare the proportion across subgroups for a particular demographic criterion. Thus, for example, Figures 3 and 4 present the data for absentee voting by party in two different ways. Although presenting the data in two ways greatly increases the number of figures in this paper, each method presents something of interest.

In Figure 3 we see the percentage of absentee voters within each party. As noted previously, Democrats have led in efforts to encourage voters to vote early, but this was

¹⁸ There has been a push for employers, particularly government employers, to provide time off for workers to vote. Some have even advocated for making Election Day a holiday (though plenty of people still have to work on holidays). “October surprises” are breaking news or information that are often damaging to a candidate and are revealed in October just before many people vote in November. Because of increased early voting, some have expressed concern that early voters may regret their choice when such information is revealed.

not the case early in the period. At least as a percentage of voters within each party, Republicans and Democrats were nearly equal through the 2000 election, with No Party voters not that far behind. Between 2000 and 2004 Democrats made huge gains in the percentage of their voters casting absentee ballots, going from 26.10% to 39.38%. Both Republicans and No Party voters also increased their percentage of absentee voting, though more so for the latter. After 2004, the more familiar pattern of Democrats having a wide lead over Republicans and Republicans a narrow lead over No Party voters emerges.

Regarding No Party voters, one could suggest two possible reasons for their lower percentage of absentee voting. The first follows from the generally lesser interest in voting as evidenced in the lower turnout percentages discussed in prior papers. If No Party voters generally have a reduced interest in voting it is not surprising that they would also have a reduced interest in taking the additional step necessary to cast an early ballot.¹⁹ This is particularly true for the need to fill out a form to request an absentee ballot, but satellite voting stations are intended to make voting easier. This leads to the second reason No Party voters may have a lower percentage of absentee voters: they simply may not have made up their minds prior to Election Day. Although there are various reasons for being a No Party voter, one reason is that such voters are sufficiently independent that they do not vote based on party but based on the individual candidates. To the extent that is true, No Party voters may very well wish to wait until Election Day before making a final decision.

Overall, we see two trends in Figure 3. The first is a general trend for increased absentee voting for all three parties. We saw in Figure 2b a steady increase in the percentage of absentee voting for each of the presidential elections except 2016. That pattern holds for each of the three parties. The trend for increased absentee voting in midterm elections also holds with the noted exceptions of 2006 and 2018. For all three parties, the absentee voter percentage in 2018 was slightly below that of 2014, but well above that of 2010. For 2006, the absentee voter percentage was below that of 2002 for all three parties, though for No Party voters the difference was less than a percentage point.

The second trend to notice in this figure is the general drop in absentee voting for midterm elections. As mentioned in the discussion for Figure 2b, the midterm drop in the percentage of absentee voting did not begin to manifest itself until after the 2004 election, though there was a small drop for 1998. In Figure 3 we can see how for 1998 although the Republican percentage increased slightly from 1996 (by 0.86%), the

¹⁹ On a related note, and at least in my county (Johnson), No Party voters who requested a traditional absentee ballot (i.e., one that had to be returned by mail to the county auditor) had a much higher percentage of non-returned ballots than either Democrats or Republicans. A rough calculation of the non-return rate for No Party voters was 10% in the elections since 2000. Democrats were a few points better (i.e., lower) than No Party voters and Republicans a point or two better than Democrats.

percentage for both Democrats and No Party voters decreased. In contrast, for 2002 it was Republicans who had a decreased percentage from 2000 and both Democrats and No Party voters gained. Beginning in 2006 we see drops in the midterm absentee percentage from the prior presidential year for all three parties, though for Republicans in 2014 it was only by 0.14% and in 2018 it was small for all three parties. Interestingly, we saw in Figure 2b that the overall absentee percentage in 2016 was only barely above the percentage for 2014. In Figure 3 we see that for Republicans and No Party voters the 2016 absentee percentage was actually lower than for 2014, if only slightly (0.51% for Republicans and 0.01% for No Party voters). This had actually occurred once before for Republicans when their percentage in 1992 (10.82%) was slightly lower than their percentage for 1990 (10.89%).

The general drop in turnout for midterms would not seem to directly affect the percentage of absentee voting among those who do turnout. Indirectly, however, it does. It is well known that more resources and effort are put into the turnout efforts for presidential elections compared to midterm elections. One aspect of those efforts, of course, is the work done to encourage voters to request absentee ballots or vote early. In addition, the generally lower interest of voters during midterm elections likely causes more voters to wait longer before making up their minds, which might lead many to not cast a ballot at all. On the other hand, from Figure 2b notice that the midterm drop in the percentage of absentee voters has decreased over the last three midterms. In Figure 3 we can see that in 2006 the drop was about 10% for Democrats and No Party voters, with Republicans at about 8%. For 2010 both Democrats and No Party voters dropped only about 5% with Republicans at 1.5%. For 2014 Democrats and No Party voters only dropped about 4% and the percentage for Republicans was down only 0.14%. For 2018 Republicans and No Party voters dropped by less than 1.5% and Democrats by 2.27%.

Along similar lines, we would expect the additional resources in presidential years to ensure an increased percentage for absentee voting. The 2016 election was unusual, not least because of the unpopularity of the two major party candidates. Even so, Democrats still managed to increase their absentee percentage over the 2014 midterm (though not over the 2012 percentage). For Republicans, there seemed to be less emphasis than usual on absentee voting and more on traditional Election Day voting. This is reflected in the fact that although the Republican percentage of absentee voting for 2016 was below their percentage in 2012, Republican turnout in 2016 was only 1.27% lower than it had been in 2012. In contrast, although Democrats increased their absentee percentage in 2016 over 2012, their overall turnout was down by nearly 3%.²⁰

All three parties experienced a surge in absentee voting for 2020. It is not surprising that Democrats had the largest increase, from 49.89% in 2018 to 76.53% in 2020. Part of

²⁰ See Figure 3 of the second paper in the series.

this was due to Democrats generally being more willing to absentee vote, but part was also political. Aspects of restrictions due to the pandemic (masks, social distancing, etc.) became political with Democrats usually more in favor of adhering to the restrictions. Conversely, Republicans sometimes felt the restrictions were not warranted or were too draconian and were more resistant to them. Thus, even though there was a spike in absentee voting among Republicans, the 13.80% increase was the smallest of the three parties. For No Party voters, their percentage was below that of Republicans (46.22% versus 52.12%) but their increase over 2018 was a bit larger at 15.02%.

Figure 4 shows the distribution of absentee voters by party. The proportions (shown as percentages) among the three parties fit our basic expectations. As suggested in Figure 3, we see in Figure 4 that Republicans and Democrats had similar proportions of the absentee voters through the 2000 election, with the proportion of No Party voters well below them. Since 2002, Democrats have had better absentee voting efforts in Iowa, so it is no surprise that they have largest proportion of absentee voters. It is also no surprise that No Party voters have the lowest percentage. It is worth noting that for the 2002 and 2006 midterm elections Democrats made up nearly half of all absentee voters. Since the high of 2006, however, the proportion of absentee voters who are Democrats fell through 2014, but has risen since then. In contrast, the lines showing proportions of Republicans and No Party voters are nearly mirror images of each other for much of the period. To the extent that parties focus their turnout efforts on members of their own party, it makes sense that the proportion of absentee voters for those parties would increase in midterm years and decrease a bit in presidential years when more effort is put into turning out No Party voters as well.

One final point to keep in mind for Figure 4 is that during this period the differences between registered Democrats and Republicans were generally small, with the exception of a surge in registered Democrats following the 2008 caucuses. Although there were fewer registered No Party voters at the start of the period, by 1998 they were the most numerous party and remained so until 2020. Thus, neither the larger proportion of Democrats nor the smaller proportion of No Party voters among those who voted absentee can be explained simply based on registration numbers.

Absentee Voting by Sex

Figure 5 shows the percentage of men and women in each of the 17 elections who voted absentee. Consistent with the percentages in Figure 2b we see a general increase in the percentage of both men and women who are voting absentee. This trend holds for presidential elections, again with the exception of 2016. The trend would seem to hold for midterm years, but 2006 and 2018 are exceptions. What is particularly interesting about this figure is that the lines for men and women are nearly parallel. Although the percentages were nearly equal for 1988, during the entire period women have voted

absentee at an average rate 3.72% higher than for men. We might expect this difference is due to the greater emphasis Democrats place on women (particularly single women) as an important part of their base. Later figures will explore this possibility.

Figure 6 shows the distribution of men and women among the absentee voters for each election. What is striking about this figure is how flat the two lines are, especially after 1992. On average 13.25% more of those who cast absentee ballots were women. Lest one think this result boring, keep in mind the consistency of this distribution is despite a general increase in absentee voting (including the 2020 surge) and substantial turnout differences between midterm and presidential elections. It is also worthwhile to keep in mind that even though the distribution between men and women has been fairly constant, the actual number of voters creating that distribution has increased. Thus, although there were 6,523 more women than men casting absentee ballots in 1988, that number was 105,231 in 2020.

Absentee Voting by Sex and Party

Figure 7 shows the percentages of absentee voters in six subgroups divided by party and sex. There are several quick points that can be made about this figure. First, the trends we saw previously in Figures 3 and 5 are present in this figure: women were more likely to vote absentee than men, Democrats were more likely to vote absentee than Republicans or No Party voters, and there has been a general increase in absentee voting. Second, there was a persistent “gender gap” in absentee voting. Women had a higher percentage of absentee voting for Democrats and Republicans in all 17 elections. For No Party voters, women had a higher percentage of absentee voting for 15 of the 17 elections, the two exceptions being 1988 and 1992. It is not particularly surprising that the gap was largest for Democrats for all but four elections (1998, 2008, 2018, and 2020). That the average gap for Republicans was larger than for No Party voters (3.43% versus 1.93%) is a bit surprising given efforts on the part of Democrats in particular to reach out to women No Party voters who have expressed support for Democrats based on phone calling and door to door canvassing. Third, although the gap was relatively stable for Democrats, especially after 1996, it increased for both Republicans and No Party voters. In the 1988 through 2006 elections the gap for Republicans was always under 4.0% and for No Party voters it was always under 3.0%. In the 2008 through 2020 elections the gap for Republicans was always over 4.0% and for No Party voters it was always over 3.0% except for 2018 when it was 2.99%. In fact, the gap for No Party voters grew from an average of 0.70% in the first 10 elections to 3.69% in the next seven.

Figure 8 shows the percentage of absentee voters belonging to each subgroup. The first thing to notice is the dominance of women Democrats. They were the largest subgroup of absentee voters in 15 of the 17 elections and made up 25% or more of absentee voters in 11 of the 17 elections. Women were also a higher percentage of absentee voters for Republicans and No Party voters (except for No Party voters in 1988), though the gap is

smaller. One interesting aspect of this figure is how after 2000 the lines for all but women Democrats are rather bunched and several cross at various points. No Party voters still generally had the lowest proportions, but women No Party voters had a higher proportion than Republican men for the 2004 and 2008 elections. Similarly, Republican women were regularly a larger proportion of absentee voters before 2002, but their lines were mixed thereafter. On the other hand, the lines for Republican and Democrat men were mixed throughout the period, though Republican men had a larger proportion for 10 of the 17 elections. On the whole, notice that by 2012 five of the subgroups, all but women Democrats, were rather closely bunched, and four of those were within two percentage points of each other. The bunching continued in 2018, though it seemed to form two groups: No party men and women closer together in the bottom group around 11% and Democrat men and Republican men and women closer together around 17%. The surge in absentee voting in 2020 for Democrats allowed Democrat men to have a higher percentage than both Republican men and women for the first time in a presidential election since 2004.

One final point to make about Figure 8 concerns the general pattern we see in the lines after 2000. Notice that, with some minor variations, the general pattern is for the proportion of Democrats and Republicans, men and women, to be a bit higher in midterm election years and lower in presidential years. Conversely, the clear pattern for No Party voters, both men and women, is for increased proportions in presidential years and decreased proportions in midterm years. Although this might seem counterintuitive at first, it makes sense to see this different pattern for No Party voters. As mentioned previously, campaigns and parties have a stronger get out the vote (GOTV) effort in presidential years. That effort includes identifying supporters among No Party voters and getting them to vote early. On the other hand, during midterms the GOTV effort is more streamlined and tends to focus a bit more on turning out the base. Thus, in terms of proportions of the absentee voters, No Party voters will be a larger proportion in years when emphasis is also placed on them and a smaller proportion when it is not.

Absentee Voting by Age Group

Election data provided by the Iowa Secretary of State's office also breaks the results into five age groups: 18-24, 25-34, 35-49, 50-64, and 65 & Over. Figure 9 shows the percentage of each age group that voted absentee. Notice first that the general trend of increased absentee voting over the period that we saw in prior figures is present for each of the five age groups. Also present for each of the groups is the general pattern of increases in absentee voting in presidential years and decreases in midterm years after 2004. The one exception was that absentee voting in 2016 for the 18-24 group was 1.84% below that of 2014. In addition, the increase in absentee voting for the 25-34 group in 2016 was only 0.22% more than in 2014.

What is different about this figure is the ordering of the groups. Results from prior papers showed that each older age group had a higher turnout percentage until the oldest group, which nevertheless had the highest turnout percentage in midterm elections.²¹ Here, however, the youngest age group (18-24) actually had the highest absentee voting percentage in four elections (1988, 1990, 1994, and 1998) and the second highest in seven elections (1992, 1996, 2000 to 2006, and 2010). At a certain level, this is understandable given the effort put into getting college students to vote and given the generally low turnout of this age group. What is odd, however, is that this group did not have a higher percentage in 2008 given the emphasis on the youth vote by Democrats and the Obama campaign. The 65 & Over group had the highest percentage of absentee voters in 13 of the 17 elections. This is not surprising given the emphasis the parties place on making sure that older voters have an opportunity to vote. In addition to helping such voters fill out absentee request forms, the parties and campaigns will provide rides and directions to early voting locations. The 50-64 group had turnout percentages similar to those of the 65 & Over group, but their absentee voting percentages are well behind those of the older group. The lines for the final two groups, 25-34 and 35-49, are nearly indistinguishable and are well below the 50-64 group. Interestingly, the 25-34 group has slightly higher percentages than the 35-49 group. This might be a holdover from being more heavily targeted for absentee voting while in the 18-24 group, but the effect seems to fade slightly upon reaching the 35-49 group.

One thing to note about the percentage increases in 2020 over 2018 for the five groups is that they are in order based on age. The 65 & Over group had the largest percentage increase at 24.50%. The 50-64 group was next at 19.33%. Next came the 35-49 group with an increase of 16.95. The 25-34 group was slightly lower at 16.37. The 18-24 group had the smallest increase at only 15.18%. One cannot say for sure with this data, but this ordering may reflect increasing concerns regarding COVID-19 and its effects on people within the various age groups.

Consistent with prior pairs of figures, Figure 10 shows the proportion of each age group (as a percentage) among all absentee voters. To some extent, the pattern here is reminiscent of the flat lines for the proportions of men and women we saw in Figure 6. That the number of registered voters in each age group was relatively stable over the period contributes to the flatness of the lines, at least for the four younger age groups. (See Figure 2 of the fourth paper in the series.) Turnout, of course, was also a factor and from Figure 5 of the series' fourth paper we saw that the 18-24 age group had the lowest turnout percentage. The turnout percentage of each successive group increased until the 65 & Over group, which was very similar to that of the 50-64 group. Thus, at an initial level, it is not surprising that the two youngest groups have the smallest

²¹ See, in particular, Figure 5 of the fourth paper in the series.

proportion of absentee voters and that the proportion increases for each successive older group.

Looking at the data more closely, one explanation for the smaller proportion of the 18-24 and 25-34 groups is that because they cover a smaller range of years they contain a smaller number of registered voters. Figure 2 in the fourth paper in the series confirmed that the 18-24 group had the smallest number of registered voters, averaging 221,457 over the 20 elections (1982 through 2020). The 25-34 group averaged 332,609 registered voters for the 20 elections. The 35-49 and 50-64 groups averaged over 400,000 registered voters and the 65 & Over group averaged about 395,000 registered voters. Thus, even though the 18-24 group had the second highest average percentage of absentee voting, as we saw in Figure 9, the smaller number of voters in the group resulted in a fairly low proportion of all absentee voters. Although there were more voters in the 25-34 group, that group also had a lower percentage of absentee voting, resulting in a proportion very similar to that of the 18-24 group.

The 35-49 group had the next largest proportion of absentee voters, at least after 1996. Between 1988 and 1996 the proportion of absentee voters in the 35-49 group was nearly equal to those in the 50-64 group. Both groups generally increased their proportion during this period, but then the 35-49 group leveled off and eventually hovered below 20% for the last eight elections. Although as we saw in Figure 9 the percentage of absentee voting for the 35-49 group was nearly identical to the percentage for the 25-34 group, the larger number of voters in this group and their higher turnout percentage resulted in a larger proportion of the absentee total.

Similarly, the larger number of voters in the 50-64 group, higher turnout percentage, and higher percentage of absentee voting resulted in a larger proportion of the absentee total compared to the 35-49 group. Again, however, this difference only appeared after 1996. Unlike the 35-49 group which leveled off after 1994, the proportion of absentee voters in the 50-64 group continued to slowly increase through 2014, but then tapered off for the next three elections.

The 65 & Over group begins the period with more than 45% of absentee voters in the first two elections. From 1990 to 2004 the proportion of absentee voters in this group steadily declined. This proportional decline can be explained by the sharp increase in the number of voters taking advantage of absentee voting. From Figure 2b we saw a steady increase in the percentage of voters casting absentee ballots. At the start of the period, voters casting absentee ballots in one form or another tended to be those more traditionally using such methods, which would often mean older voters. As more emphasis was placed on absentee ballots and early voting in general, more voters from other age groups began to use the methods. Thus, the proportion of absentee voters in the 65 & Over group would necessarily decrease. Nevertheless, although the 65 & Over group actually has a smaller number of registered voters than either of the two next

younger groups, a high turnout percentage and the highest absentee voting percentage results in this group having the highest proportion of absentee voters in all 17 elections.

In terms of the general shapes of the lines, notice that the increases and decreases in presidential and midterm years for the three youngest groups are the opposite of those in the two older groups. This pattern is particularly pronounced after the 2002 election. The proportions of absentee voters for the three youngest groups increased in presidential years and decreased in midterm years, but the opposite was the case for the two oldest groups, most especially for the 65 & Over group which had the greatest amount of variation overall. Again, from Figure 5 of the fourth paper in the series we saw that the two oldest groups had both the highest turnout percentages and also the smallest amount of variation between presidential and midterm elections. Thus, because absentee voting for the two oldest groups is more stable, as the number of absentee voters in the three youngest groups decreases the proportion of absentee voters in the two oldest groups increases.

Absentee Voting by Age Group and Party

The next step is to separate the absentee voting of the age groups by their party affiliations. Figure 11 is split into five parts, one for each age group. Each of the five parts shows the percentage of voters in each of the three parties who voted absentee. Thus, Figure 11a shows the percentage of absentee voting among Democrats, Republicans, and No Party voters for the 18-24 group, Figure 11b for the 25-34 group, and so on.

A quick look at the parts of Figure 11 shows that the patterns for the five age groups are fairly similar and are consistent with the patterns shown for the overall party breakdown in Figure 3 and the overall age group breakdown in Figure 9. Between 1988 and 1998 there was some mixing of the lines for the parties. Republicans frequently had a higher percentage of absentee voting in this early period than Democrats, but No Party voters almost always had the lowest percentage. Beginning with the 2000 election, and with only the exception of the two youngest groups in the 2000 election, Democrats have been well above Republicans and No Party voters in terms of absentee voting percentage. Republicans had consistently higher absentee voting than No Party voters for the 18-24 age group (though for 2020 the difference was only 0.85%). For the older groups, however, the pattern is slightly mixed. In the 2008 election No Party voters had a higher absentee voting percentage than Republicans for the four older age groups. In addition, for the 2004 election No Party voters had a higher absentee voter percentage than Republicans for the 65 & Over group, and were only 0.05% behind them in the 50-64 group. No Party voters in the two oldest age groups had a higher percentage of absentee voting in 2012 than Republicans, as did the oldest group again in 2016. In 2020, No Party voters were slightly behind Republicans for the two oldest

groups (0.07% for 65 & Over, 1.37% for 50-64) but a bit ahead of them for the next two groups (0.17% for 35-49, 2.59% for 25-34).

For all age groups and parties we continue to see a steady increase in the percentage of absentee voting from 1988 through 2002. After that we see more variation between midterm and presidential voting. In particular, for all age groups and parties we see a substantial dip in absentee voting for the 2006, 2010, and 2014 midterm elections. As shown in Figure 2, the absentee voting percentage for 2002 was actually higher than for 2000. In Figure 3 we saw that this increase was primarily the result of increased absentee voting among Democrats given that the No Party voters' percentage only increased slightly for 2002 while Republicans showed a small decrease. In Figure 11 we now see that the slight increase for No Party voters and small decrease for Republicans in 2002 occurred across all age groups. Similarly, the 2002 increase for Democrats was also experienced for all five age groups. In addition, for the 18-24 group, the absentee voting percentage for Democrats was actually higher in 2002 (44.08%) than in 2004 (43.97%) if only slightly. One point to notice is that the dip in absentee voting for 2018 has the most variation among Democrats and shows an interesting pattern. The Democrats' 35-49 group actually had a slight (0.20%) increase in absentee voting. The next younger and older groups of Democrats had slight dips and the youngest and oldest groups the largest dips.

The last point to note about Figure 11 is that although all three parties in the 65 & Over group were over 70% for 2020, Democrats were at 89.25% (29.03% higher than 2018).

Figure 12 is also divided into five parts based on age group. Each part shows the proportion of voters of each party affiliation for that age group's absentee voters. As with the overall distribution by party shown in Figure 4, the patterns for each of the five parts are relatively level with variations between midterm and presidential elections. One thing to notice in the patterns is how the three party lines are intermingled for the 18-24 group. With each successive age group the lines after 2000 begin to separate. The line for Democrats does so more quickly, but by the 50-64 group the three lines are completely separate. Interestingly, for the 65 & Over group the gap between Democrats and Republicans seen for the 50-64 group has narrowed slightly. On the other hand, the proportion of No Party absentee voters in the 65 & Over group dropped below 18% for all 17 elections and there was a wide gap between them and Republicans.

Focusing on No Party voters, notice that they go from over 30% of absentee voters in 14 of the 17 elections (and all of the last 10) for the 18-24 group to less than 18% for the 65 & Over group in all 17 elections. The explanation for this decline in the proportion of No Party voters is largely a factor of the decreasing proportion of registered No Party voters in general. From Figures 3a-e of the fourth paper in the series we saw that those registered as No Party voters dominated the 18-24 group. For that group, No Party registered voters averaged 112,947 for the 20 elections from 1982. That number was

more than the combined registration average for Democrats and Republicans. In sharp contrast, for the 65 & Over group No Party registered voters only averaged 76,856 and were less than half of the average number registered for either Democrats or Republicans. Thus, it is no surprise that the proportion of No Party absentee voters varied so much across age groups.

Absentee Voting by Age Group, Sex, and Party

Figures 13 and 14 examine absentee voting by all three of the characteristics we have discussed thus far. Once again, each figure is divided into five parts based on the five age groups.

Figure 13 shows the percentage within each subgroup that voted absentee. On the whole, the patterns are similar to what we saw for the prior groups. There is still a general trend toward increased absentee voting and women tend to have higher absentee voting percentages than men. We still see large dips in all the percentages for the 2006 and 2010 midterm elections and smaller ones for 2014 and 2018. The 2002 percentages are more mixed, with men and women Democrats and No Party voters showing an increase over 2000 for all age groups while men and women Republicans show a slight decrease for all age groups.

One interesting aspect of the patterns concerns the intra-party absentee voting of men and women from one age group to the next. For the 18-24 group the pattern is as we would expect from prior figures in that women almost always had higher absentee voting percentages than the men of their party. This changed with the 25-34 group where the intra-party lines are closer and the men had a slightly higher percentage than women for at least eight of the elections for all three parties. On the other hand, women had a higher percentage than men for all three parties for the last seven elections. The pattern continues for the 35-49 group where there is intra-party mixing of the lines for men and women through 2006, but women for all three parties had a higher percentage since then. For the 50-64 group the pattern is similar, but the separation begins a bit earlier. The last time No Party men had a higher percentage than No Party women was in 1994. For Republicans it was in 1992. For Democrats in this group, 1988 was the only time men had a higher percentage of absentee voting than women. Given this trend, it is not surprising that for the 65 & Over group the intra-party separation between men and women was greater and there was not a single instance of men having a higher percentage of absentee voting than women of the same party.

On the other hand, it is also for the 65 & Over group where we see the most mixing of the lines among the parties. The separation between the lines for Democrats and Republicans after 2000 is at the narrowest for this group. The last instance of Republicans having a higher absentee voting percentage than Democrats was for women Republicans over men Democrats in 2000. On the other hand, the percentages

for No Party voters were sometimes above those of other groups. In particular, the absentee voting percentage for No Party men was above that of Republican men for the four presidential elections before 2020. Also, No Party women had higher absentee voting percentages than Republican men in 13 of the 17 elections, including every election after 2000. Moreover, No Party women actually had the second highest percentage for both 2004 and 2008.

Consistent with prior pairs of figures, the five parts of Figure 14 show the proportion of each sub group (as a percentage) among the total absentee voters for each age group. For the five parts of Figure 14 we see aspects of the prior patterns for both Figures 8 (sex and party) and 12 (age group and party).

Figure 14a shows the subgroup proportions for the 18-24 age group. The lines for this figure are quite mixed, as they were for Figure 12a. There are two things to note in the patterns for this figure. The first is how the lines for Republican men and women are nearly identical after 1996 and mixed in the sense that each has a higher proportion in at least one midterm and two presidential elections, though quite small. The second item to note is how the lines for men and women of the other two parties are less parallel than in other figures. For No Party voters the 2008 election saw a sharp increase in the proportion of women No Party voters but hardly any change for the men. For Democrats, proportions for men and women did not track together for the 1994, 2008, and 2012 elections. In these three elections the proportion of women Democrats increased while that of the men decreased. In fact, the proportion of Democrat men in this age group reached a high for 2006, decreased in elections through 2012, had a very slight 0.14% increase in 2014, and finally had a more substantial increase in 2018.

Figures 14b and 14c show the patterns for the 25-34 and 35-49 age groups, respectively. The patterns for these two figures are quite similar. We still see a fair amount of mixing of the subgroup lines, though the proportion of women Democrats was well above that of the other subgroups after the 2000 election. In these two figures we also see the proportions of men and women No party voters slowly increased and with a decreasing amount of variation between midterm and presidential elections. One final item to note for both of these two figures is that Republican men were actually a larger proportion of absentee voters than Republican women in all 17 elections.

In Figure 14d, we see the total separation of the line for women Democrats in the 50-64 group relative the other subgroups after the 1998 election. The lines for both men and women No party voters are also below the lines for all the other subgroups for the entire period. The lines for men and women Republicans are nearly identical again. The line for men Democrats is well below that of women Democrats, but is above that of both men and women Republicans for the 2002 through 2012 elections and below both since then.

Finally (!), in Figure 14e we see for the 65 & Over group clear separation of all the intra-party lines. The lines for Democrat and Republican men are fairly flat, intertwined throughout the period, and well below the women of their respective parties. Democrat and Republican women had the highest proportions during the period. From 2000 on, women Democrats consistently had the highest proportion in this age group, followed by women Republicans then the men of both major parties. No Party voters had the smallest proportions with men several points below women. As noted for Figure 12e, a primary reason for such a small proportion of No Party absentee voters is that there were far fewer registered No Party voters in this age group compared to the younger groups. Conversely, there were more registered women Democrats in this age group than any of the other subgroups, so it is not overly surprising they had the highest proportion of absentee voters for most of the period, and particularly after 1996 when the percentage of Democrats who are women became increasingly larger than the percentages for Republicans and No Party voters.²² There were actually more men registered as Republicans than Democrats for this age group. The Republicans also had a higher turnout rate overall, but the emphasis placed on absentee voting by the Democrats allowed their men to have a higher proportion for this age group for eight of the 17 elections.

Concluding Comments

The results show a trend for increased absentee voting in Iowa. The general trend exists for both midterm and presidential elections, though the average percentage of absentee voting in midterms is below the average for presidential elections. Beginning with a low of only 6.50% in 1988, the percentage of absentee votes steadily rose to a high of 43.20% in 2012. The election of 2016 was the first presidential election of the period that did not have a higher absentee vote percentage than the preceding presidential election. For midterm years, 2006 was an outlier in that the percentage of absentee voting was below the prior midterm year of 2002. It was also for 2006 that we started to see a larger drop in absentee voting in midterm years compared to presidential years. The absentee percentage in 2018 was also below that of 2014, but this may be due to the lower than usual 2016 absentee voting percentage and the usual dip from a presidential election to the following midterm election that has occurred since 2006. Of course, the emphasis on absentee voting due to the pandemic pushed the overall high to 58.86%.

In looking at various subgroups based on party, sex, and age group we see the conventional wisdom that Democrats are better at the early voting game than Republicans holds true. The results also show that women tend to vote absentee more than men. Although there are some variations among the subgroups these general trends are fairly robust. The results for age groups are mixed. The emphasis placed on college students (and more generally the youth vote) by Democrats resulted in the 18-24

²² See Figure 3e of the fifth paper in the series.

age group as a whole having the second highest average percentage of absentee voting during the period. Nevertheless, because the turnout percentage of the 18-24 group is generally low, the proportion of this group among all absentee voters was still low. It might, however, have been even lower were it not for the emphasis on absentee voting.

The results also showed the effect of GOTV efforts on the part of the parties and campaigns. The greater emphasis on absentee voting in presidential years is evident in the greater percentage of such votes compared to midterm elections, especially after the 2000 election. The emphasis on both young voters (the 18-24 group) and older voters (the 65 & Over group) also appears in the results given that these two groups had the highest average percentages of absentee voting.

Given the surge in absentee voting that occurred in 2020, an interesting, and important, question is the extent to which that increase will persist in future elections. We might expect the usual decrease for the 2022 midterms, but what about 2024? Part of the answer will likely lie in whether some methods of increasing absentee voting for 2020 will occur in 2022 and beyond. In particular, will all voters be mailed an absentee ballot request form? If not by the Secretary of State, by other entities? As noted above, some County Auditors took it upon themselves to also mail their voters the request forms. These happened to be counties with a larger number of registered Democrats. If they do, or if the party or an affiliated group does so, will Republicans respond in kind?

The success of Democrats in getting their base to cast either a traditional absentee ballot or engage in other forms of early voting is seen as a way for them to secure an effective lead prior to Election Day. Republicans are well aware of this and have been working to increase the absentee voting of their registered voters. At the very least, more votes cast before the election allows the parties and campaigns to focus their Election Day GOTV efforts on a smaller group of possible voters. Thus, we should expect continued emphasis on and increases in absentee voting.

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

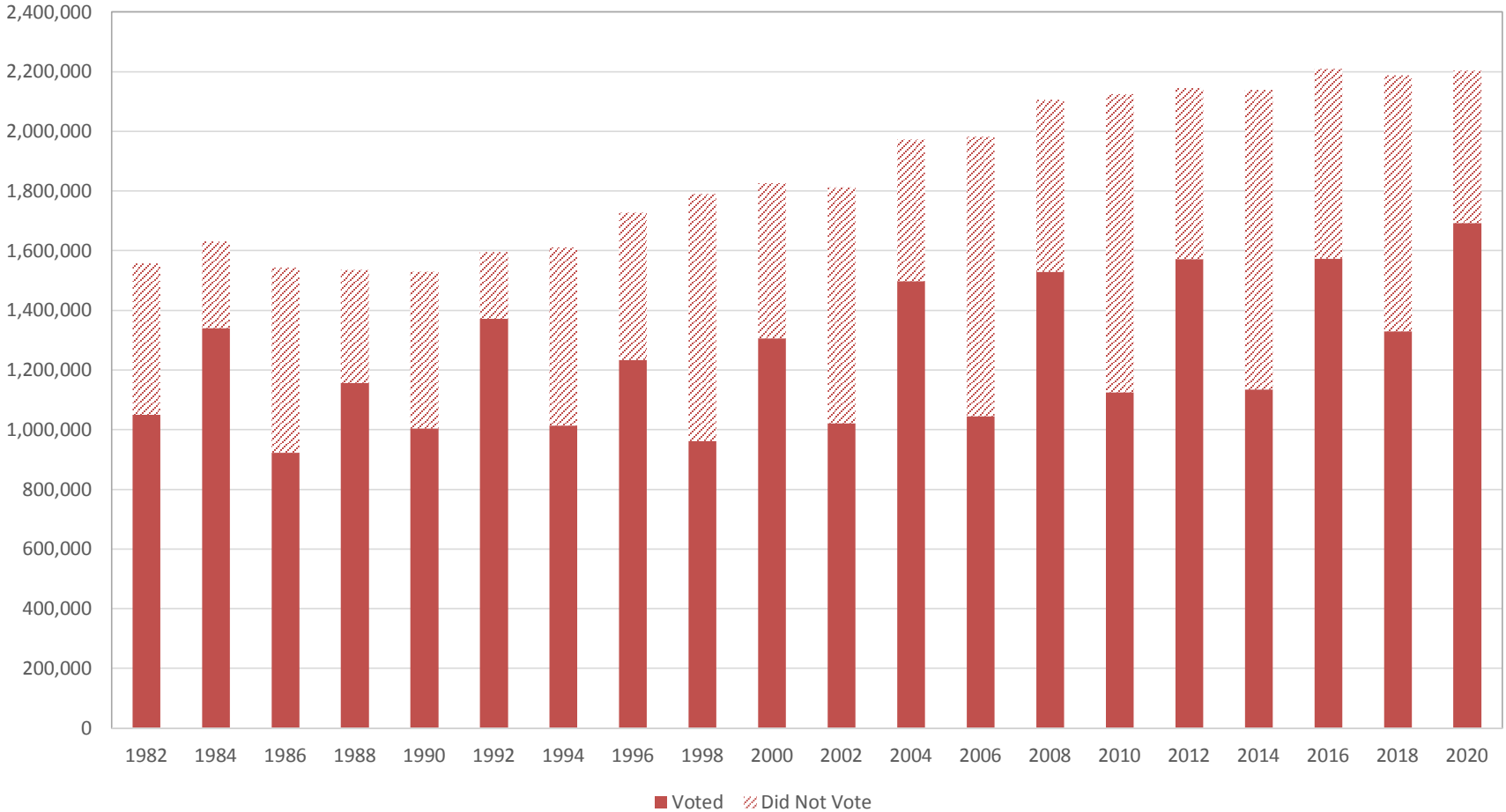


Figure 1b: Turnout Percentage of Iowa Registered Voters in Elections Since 1982

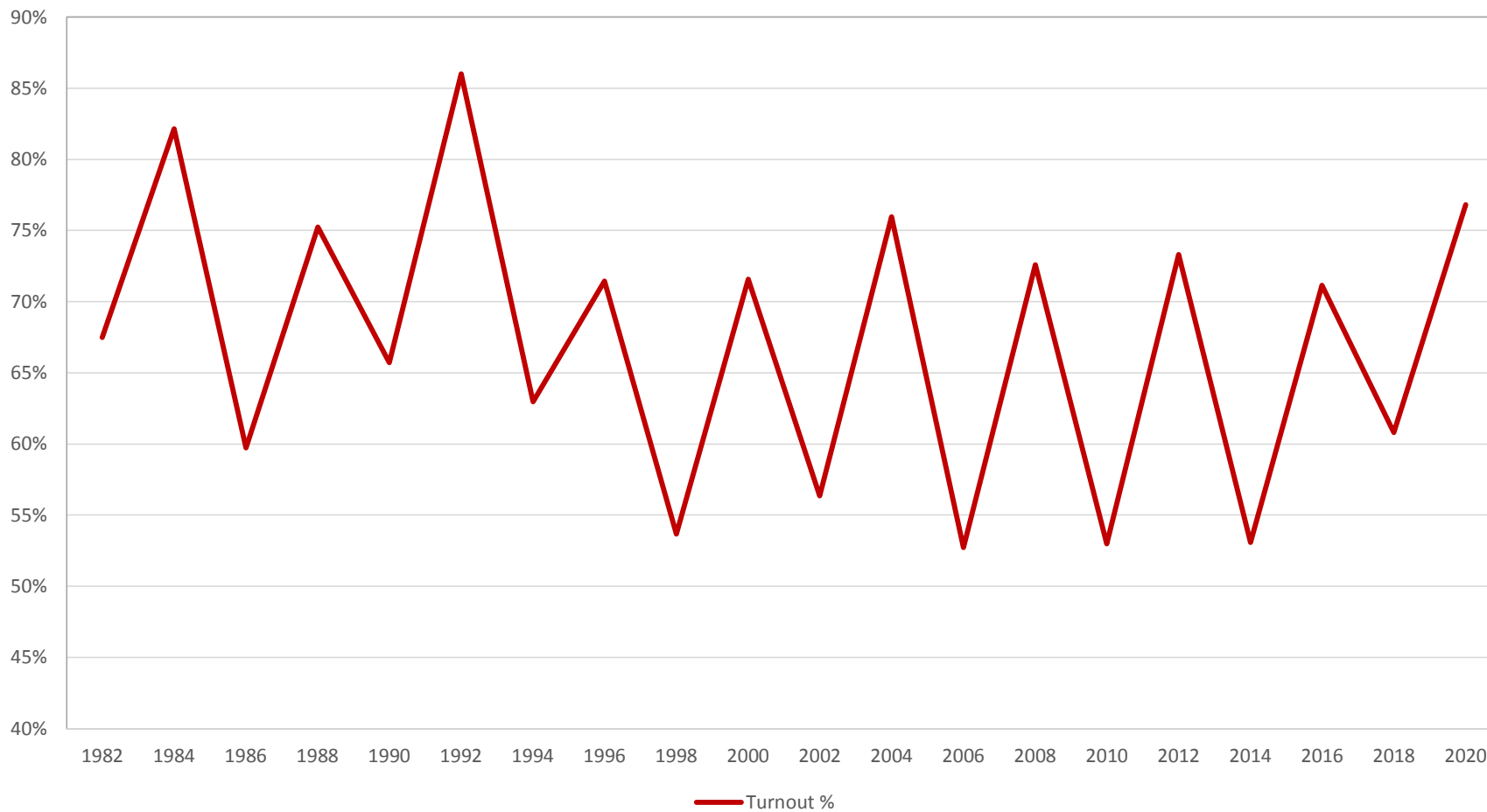


Figure 2a: Iowa Regular and Absentee Voting Numbers in Election Years Since 1988

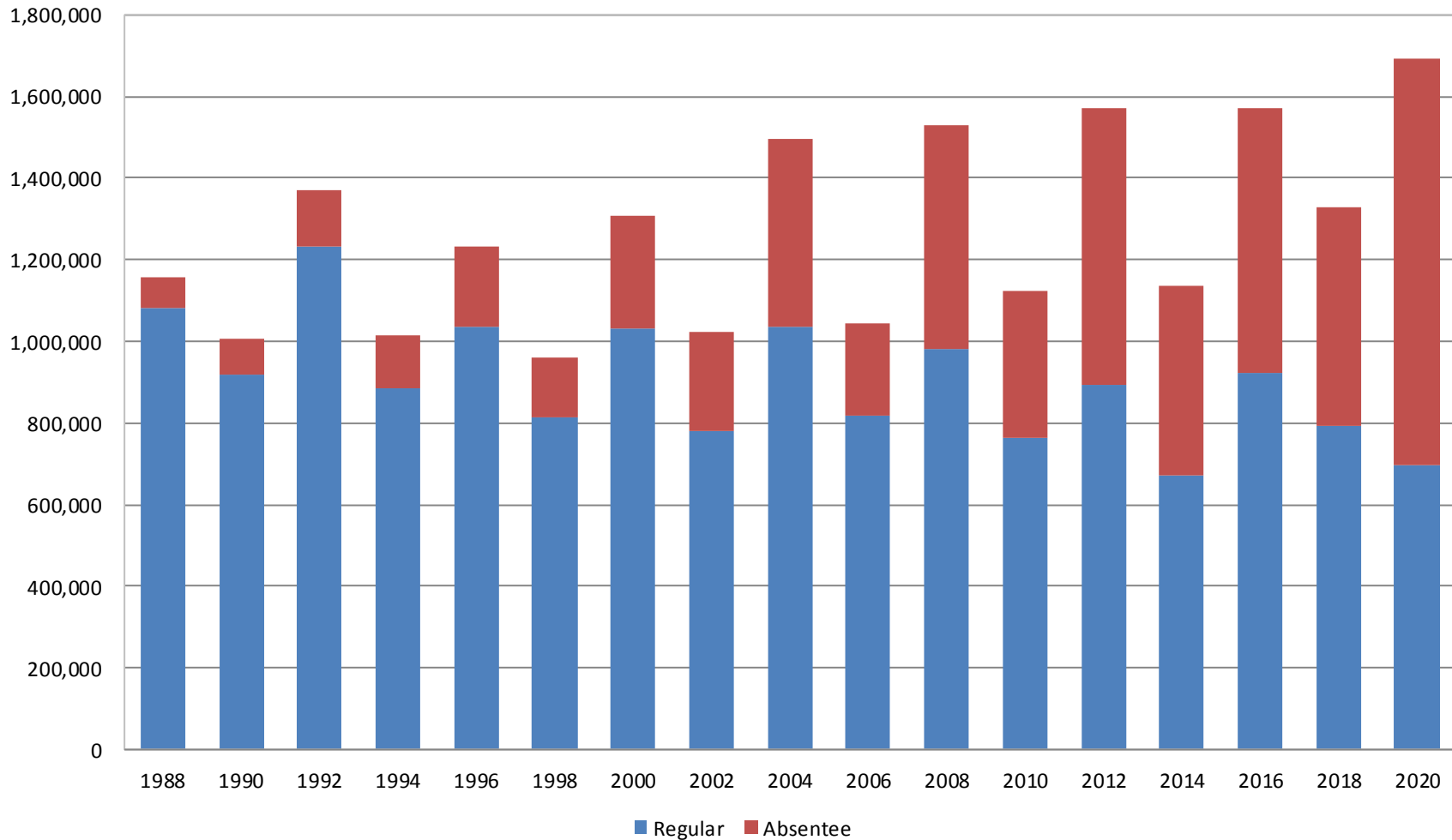


Figure 2b: Iowa Absentee Voting Percentage in Election Years Since 1988

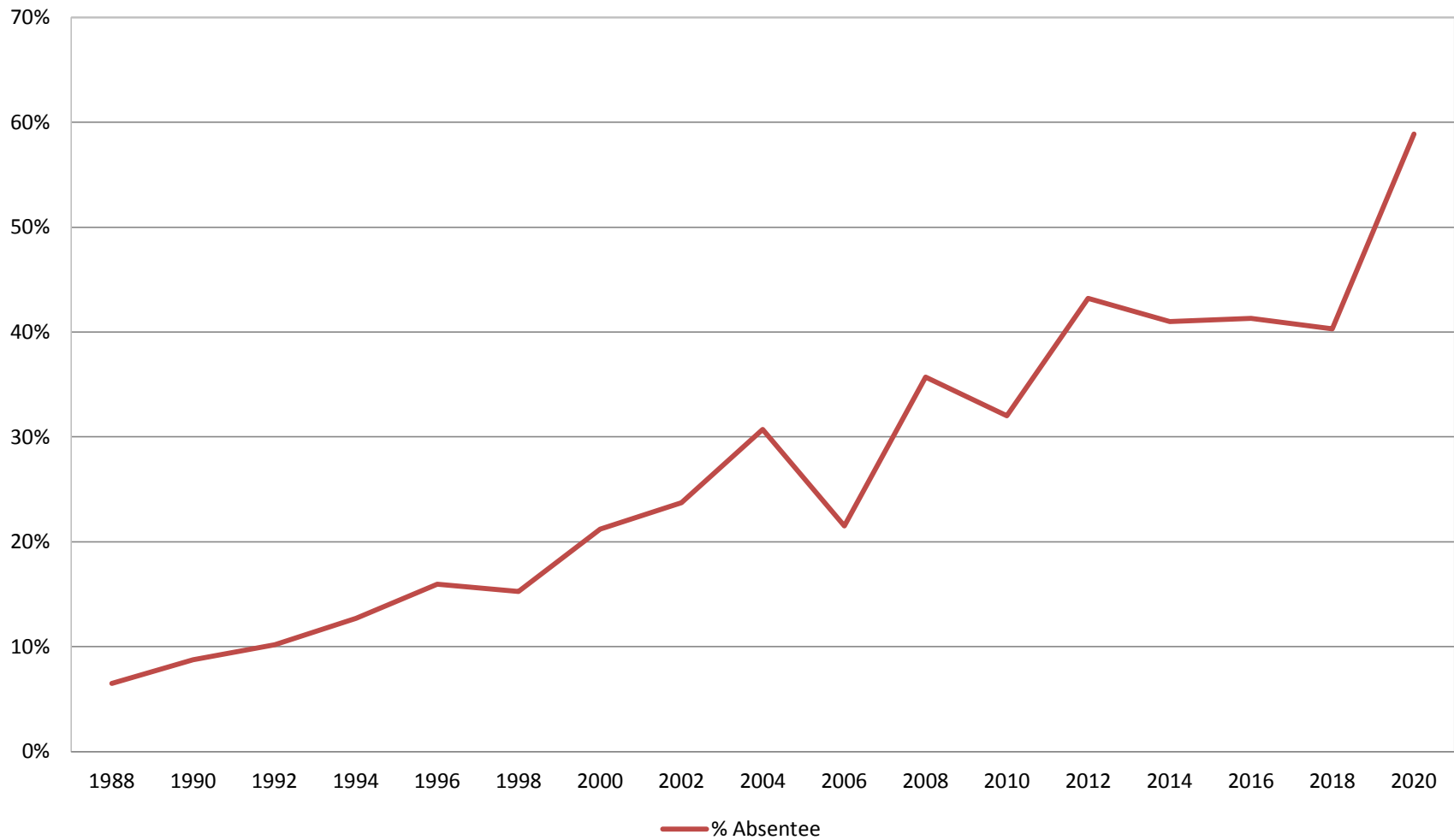


Figure 3: Percentage of Iowa Voters Voting Absentee Within Each Party in Election Years Since 1988

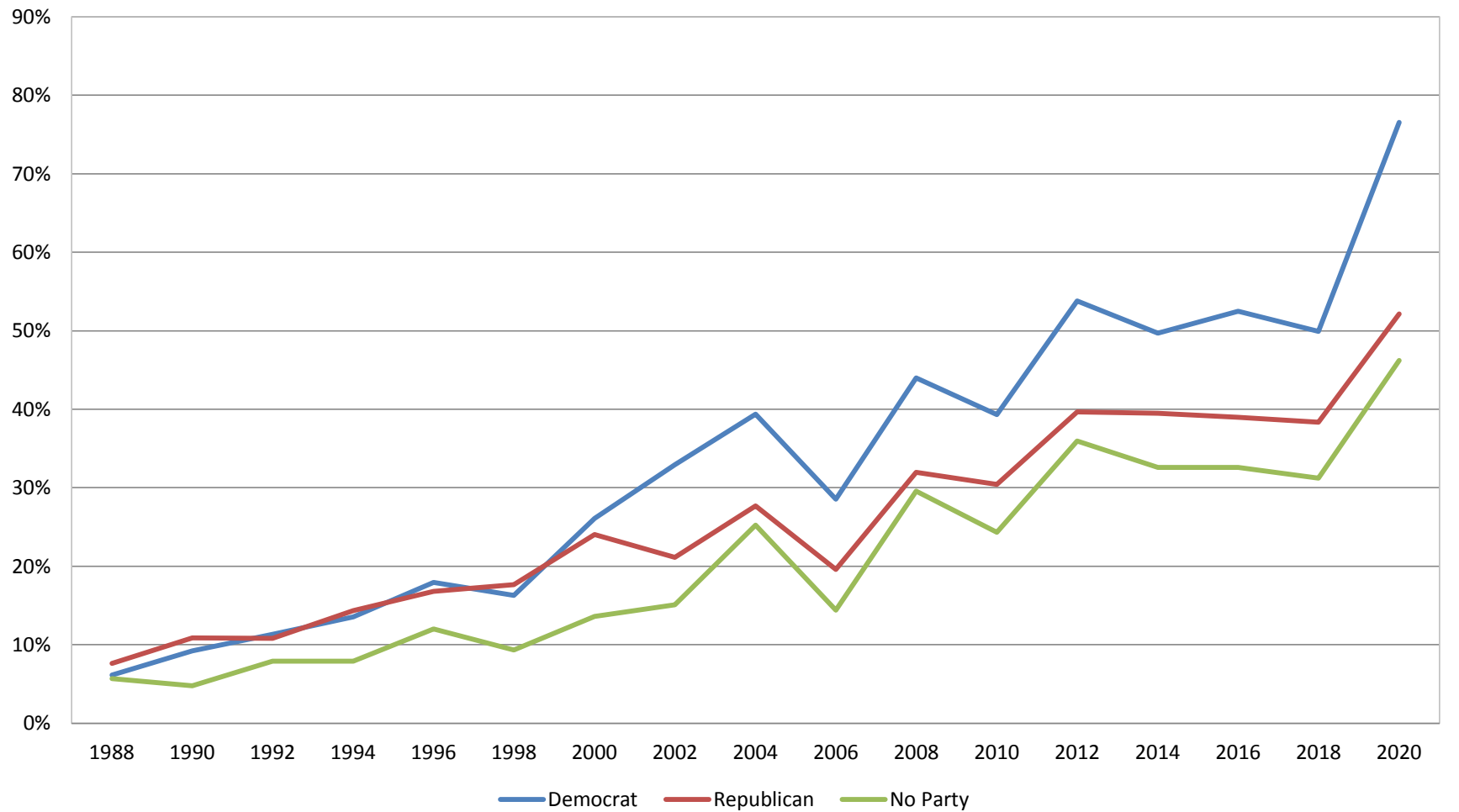


Figure 4: Distribution of Iowa Absentee Voters by Party in Election Years Since 1988

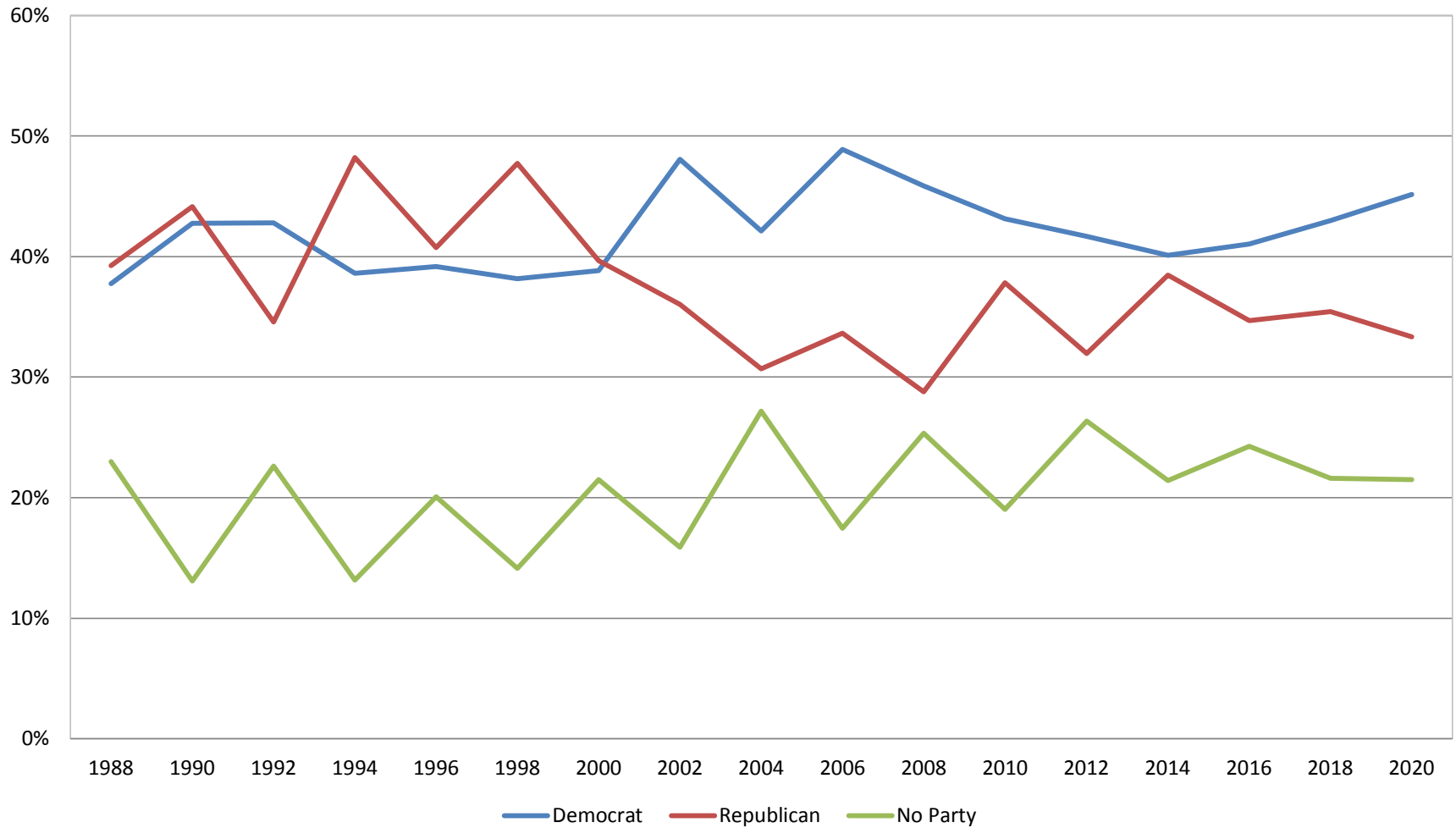


Figure 5: Percentage of Iowa Voters Voting Absentee for Each Sex in Election Years Since 1988

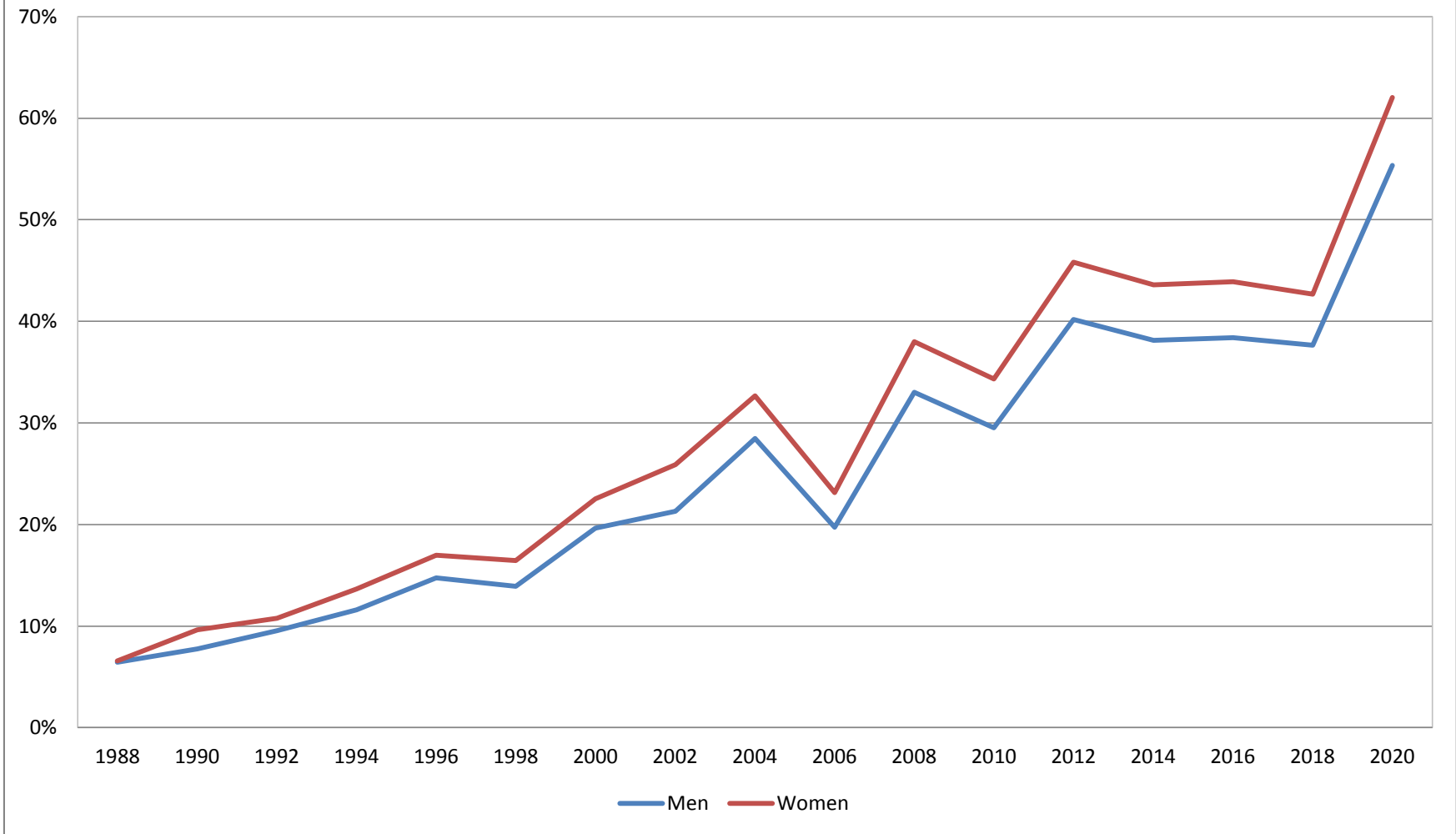


Figure 6: Distribution of Iowa Absentee Voters by Sex in Election Years Since 1988

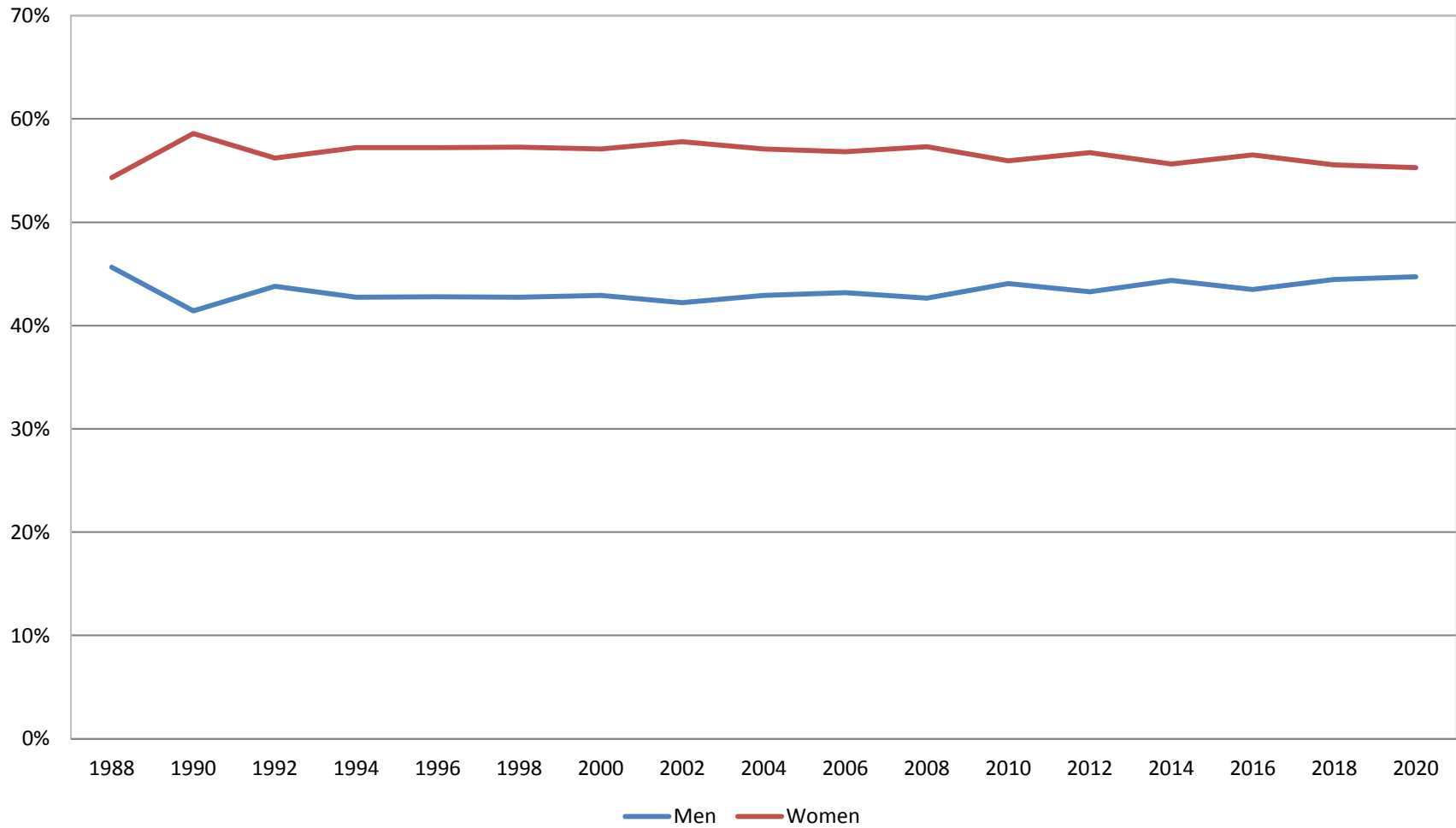


Figure 7: Percentage of Iowa Voters Voting Absentee by Sex and Party in Election Years Since 1988

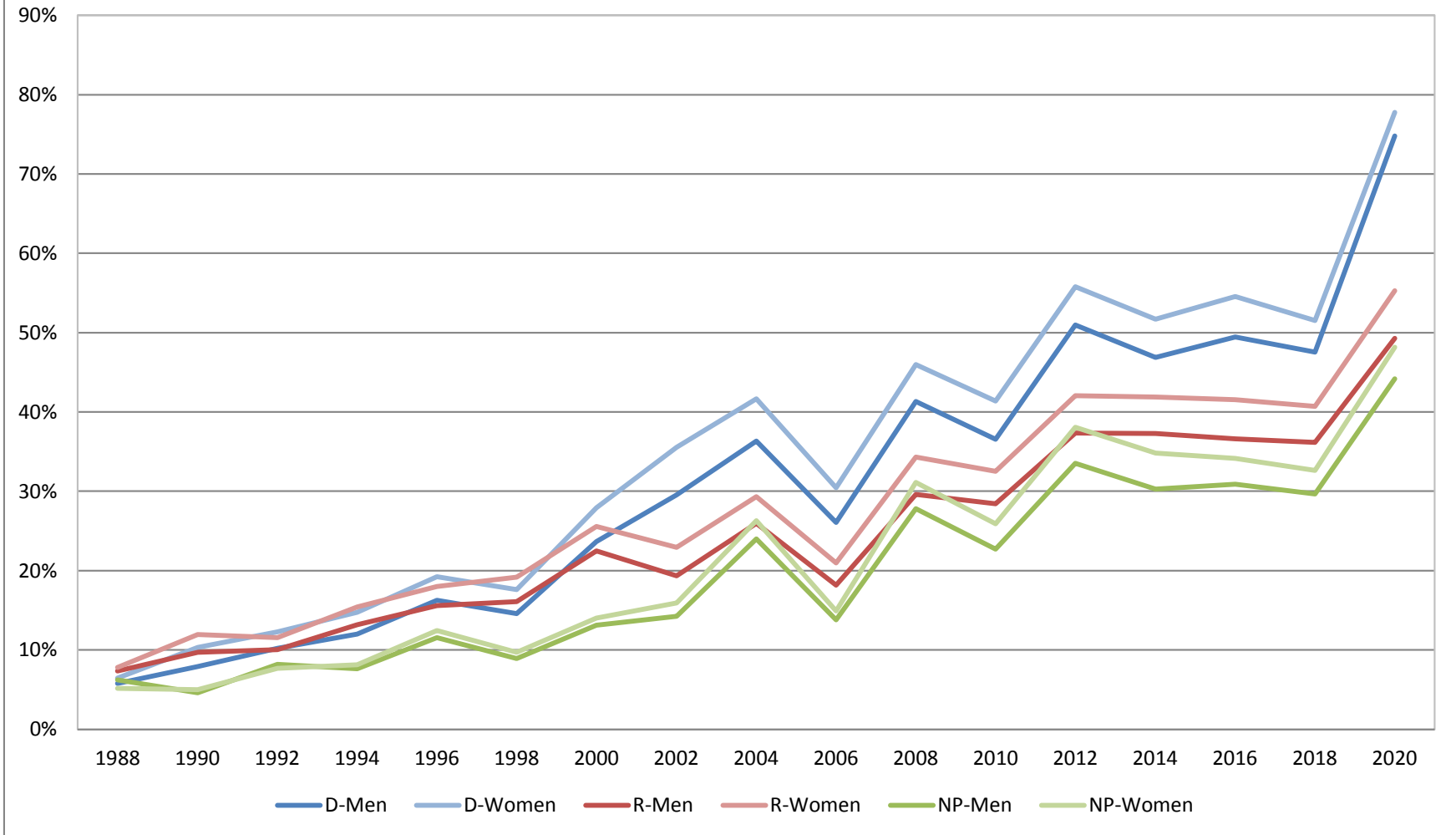


Figure 8: Distribution of Iowa Absentee Voters by Sex and Party in Election Years Since 1988

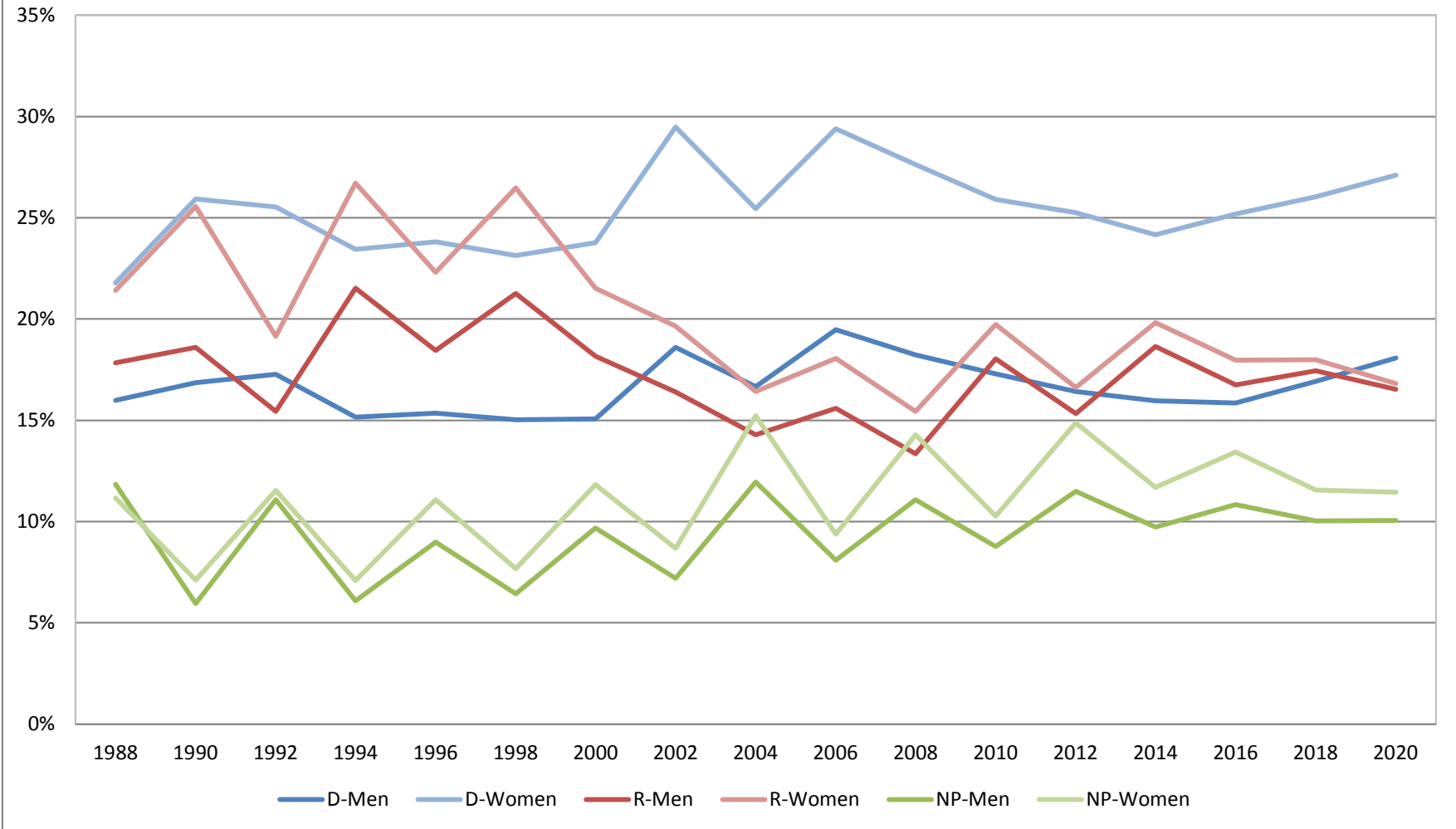


Figure 9: Percentage of Iowa Voters Voting Absentee for Each Age Group in Election Years Since 1988

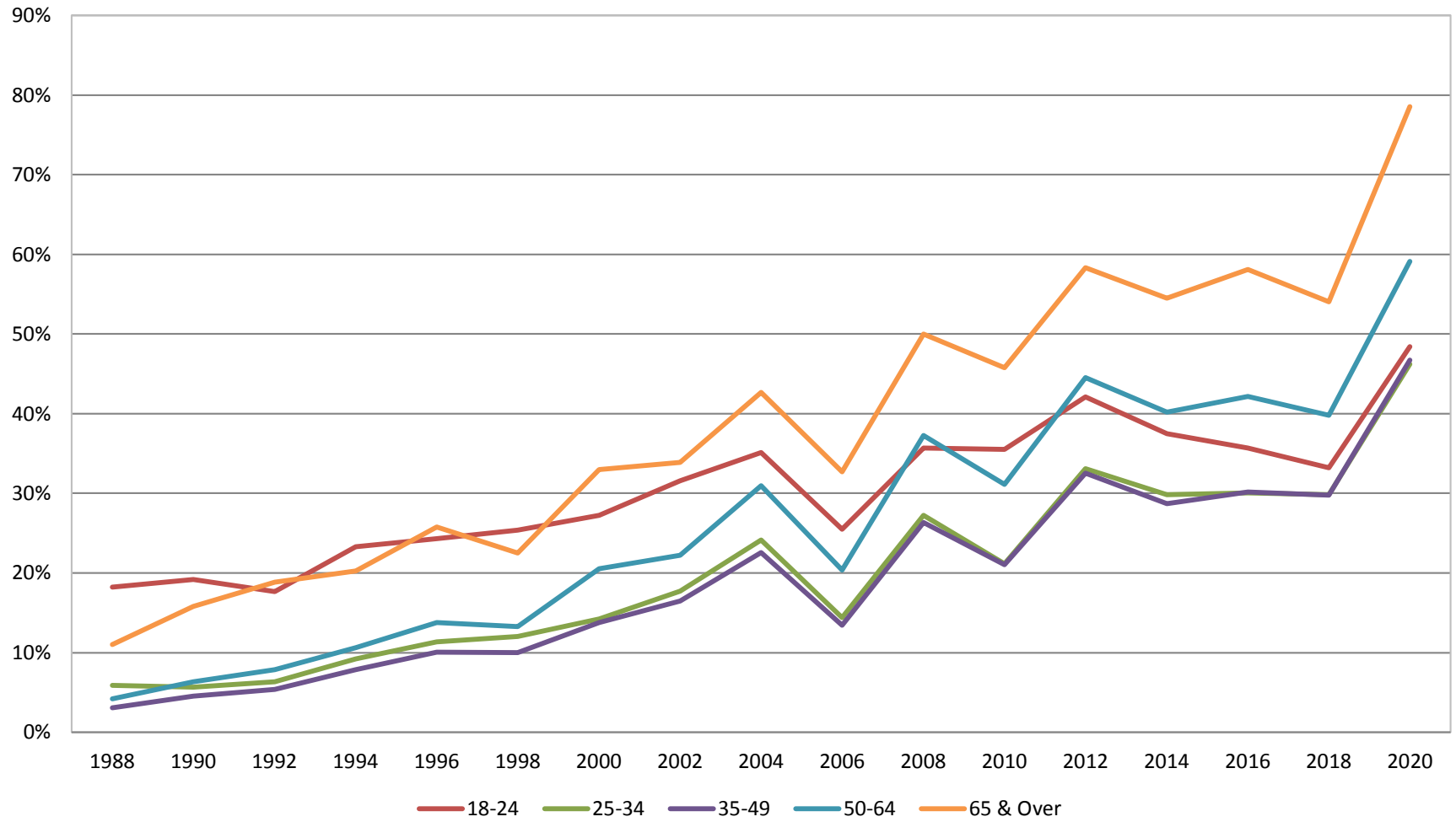


Figure 10: Distribution of Iowa Absentee Voters by Age Group in Election Years Since 1988

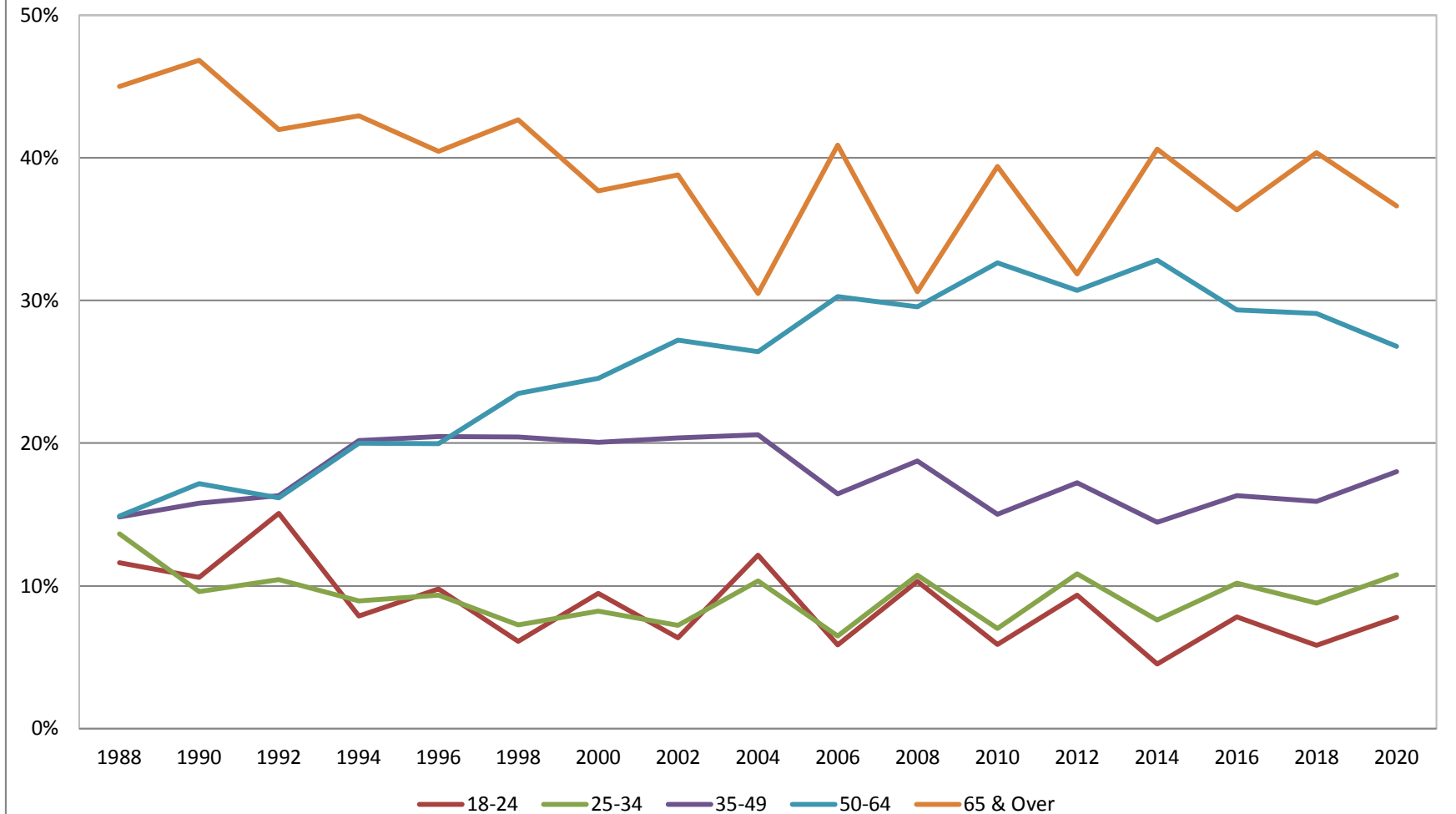


Figure 11a: Percentage of Iowa Voters in Age Group 18-24 Voting Absentee by Party in Election Years Since 1988

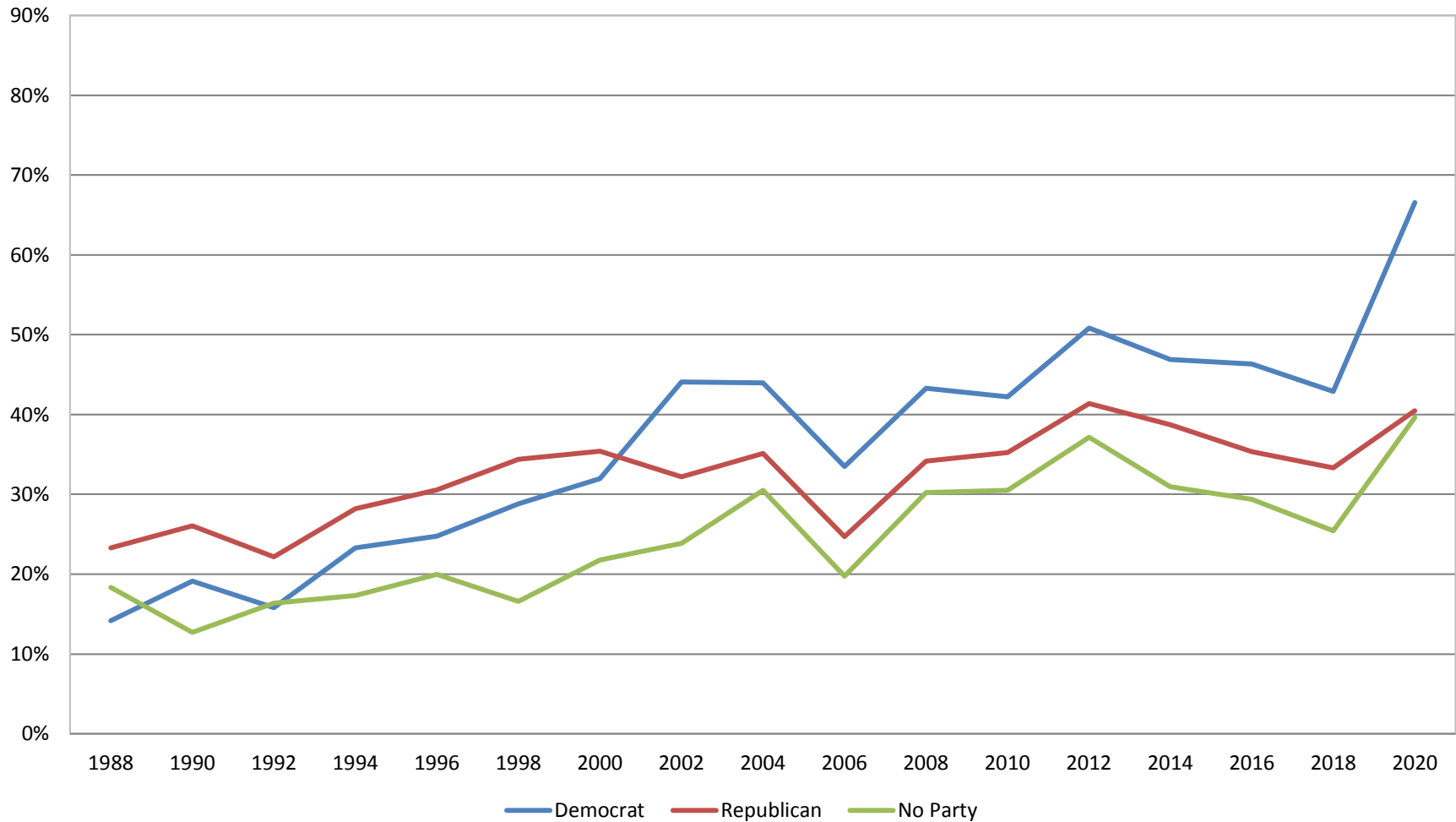


Figure 11b: Percentage of Iowa Voters in Age Group 25-34 Voting Absentee by Party in Election Years Since 1988

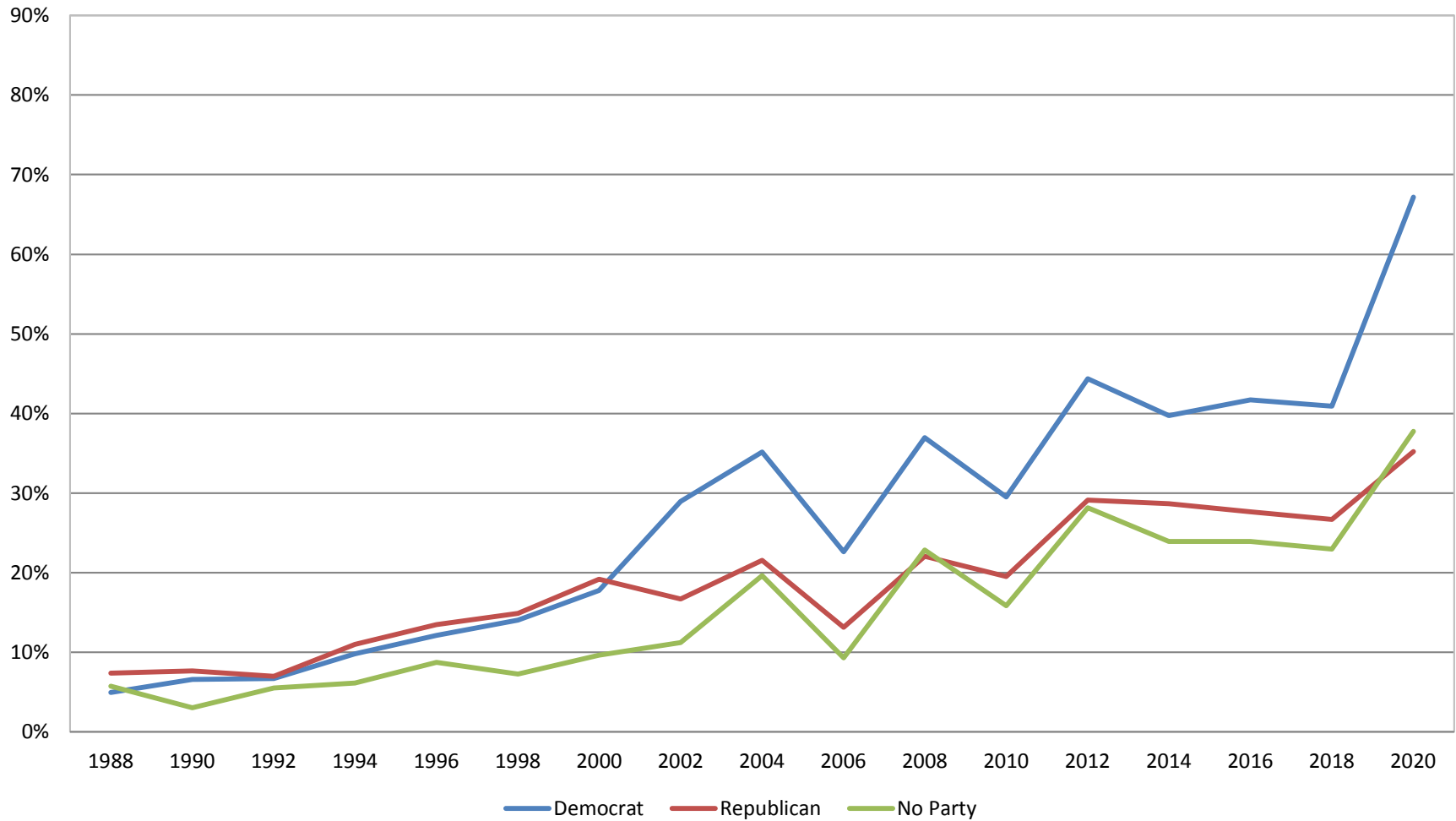


Figure 11c: Percentage of Iowa Voters in Age Group 35-49 Voting Absentee by Party in Election Years Since 1988

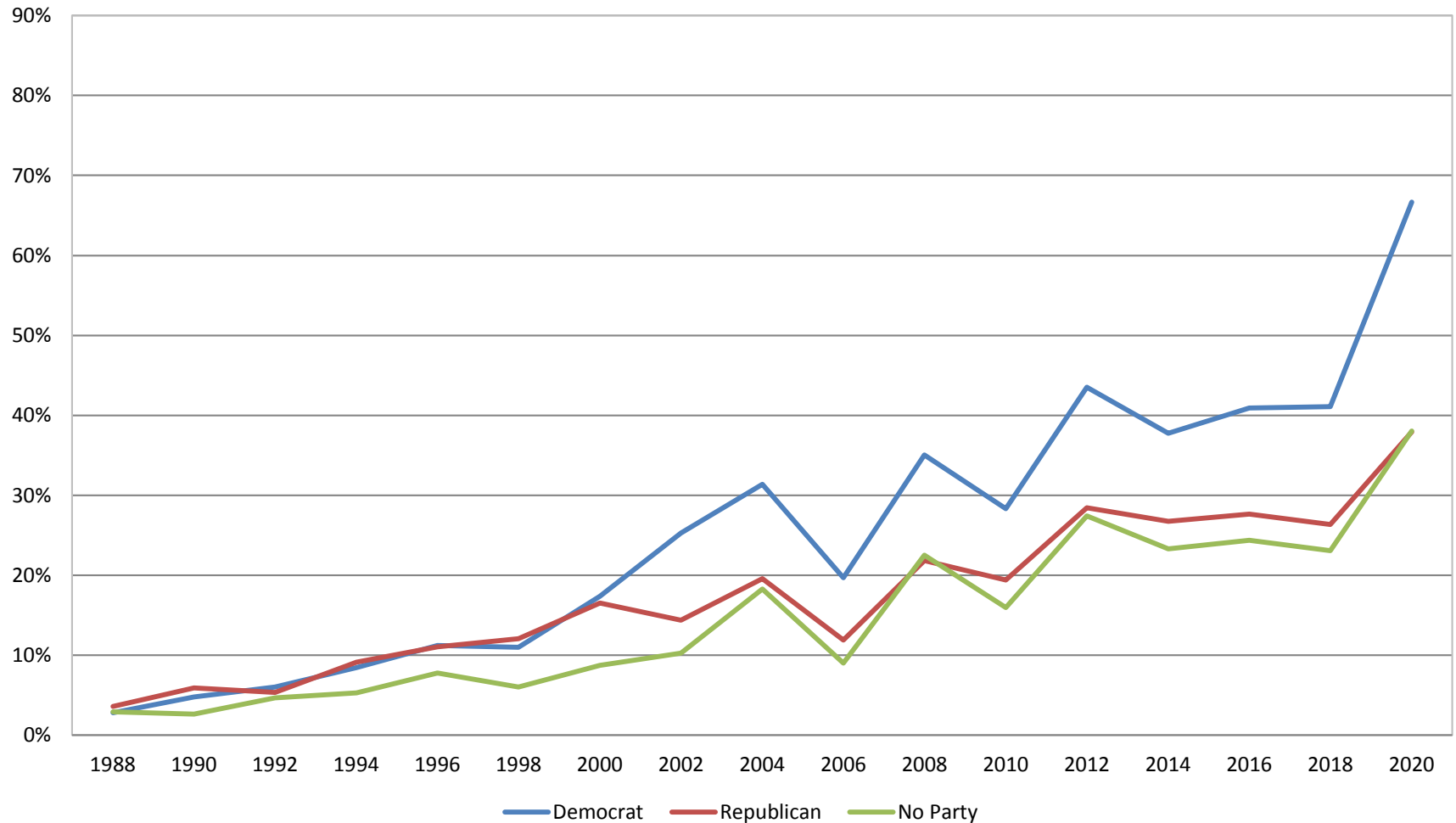


Figure 11d: Percentage of Iowa Voters in Age Group 50-64 Voting Absentee Within Each Party in Election Years Since 1988

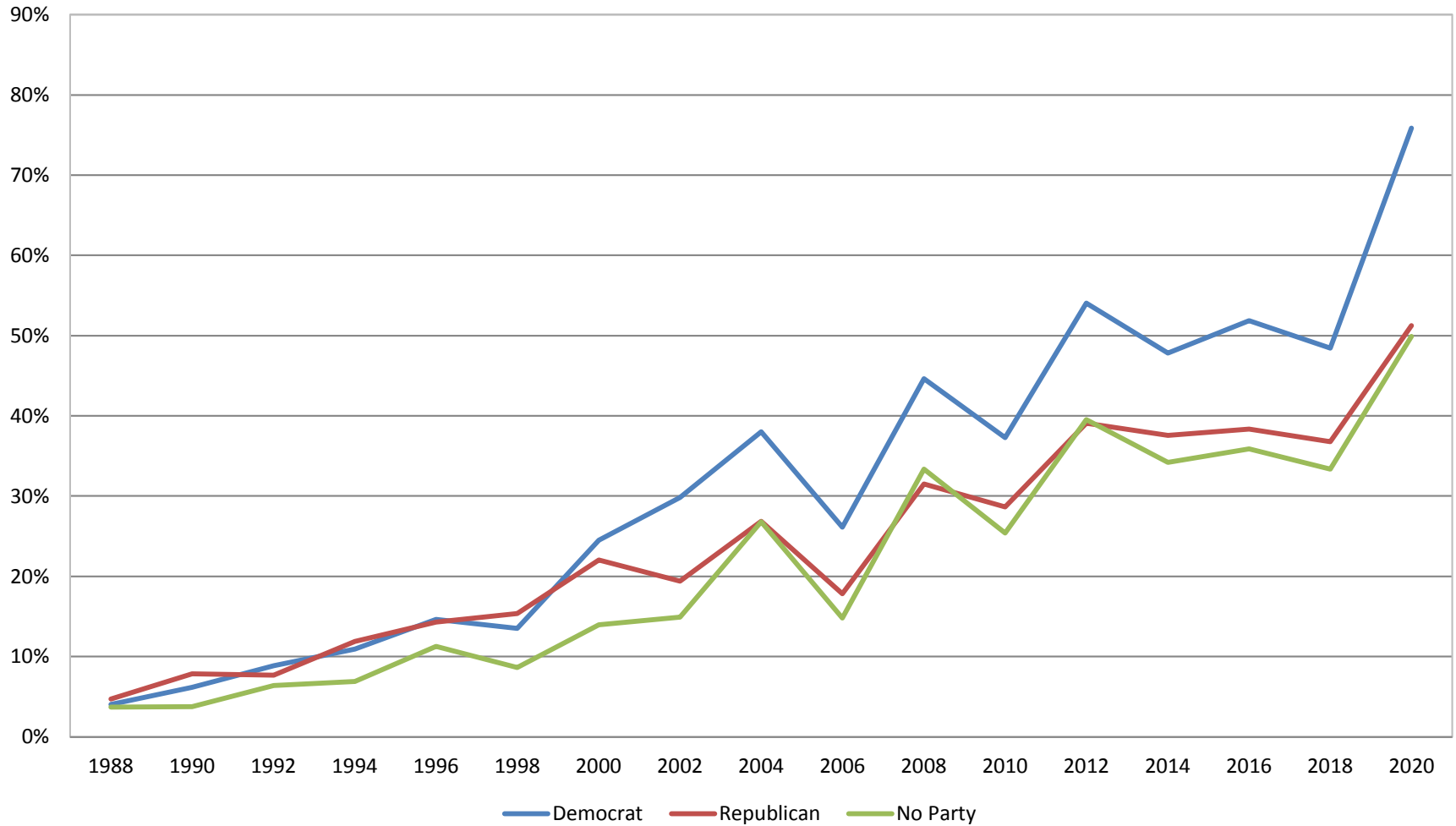


Figure 11e: Percentage of Iowa Voters in Age Group 65 & Over Voting Absentee by Party in Election Years Since 1988

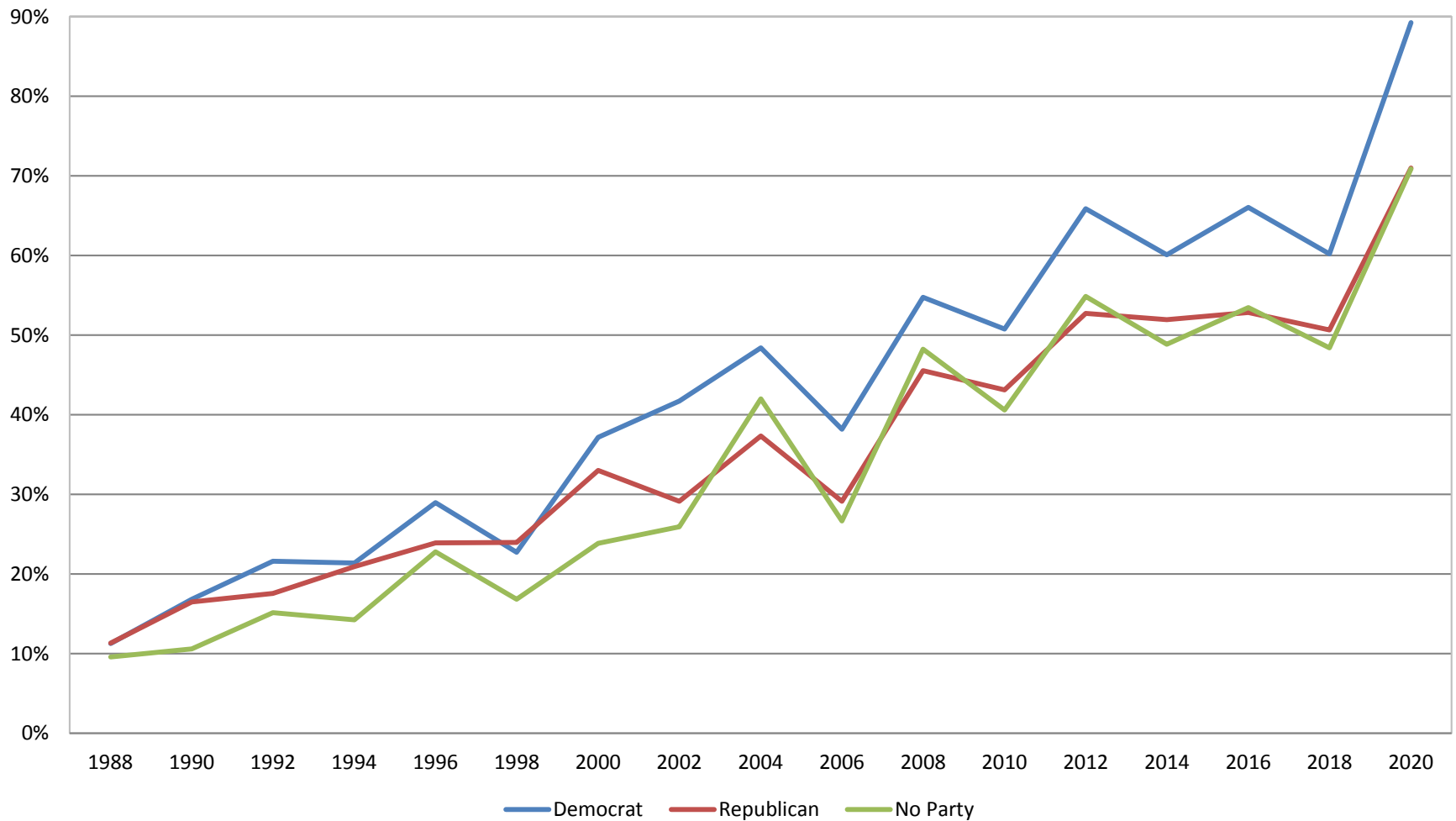


Figure 12a: Distribution of Iowa Absentee Voters in Age Group 18-24 by Party in Election Years Since 1988

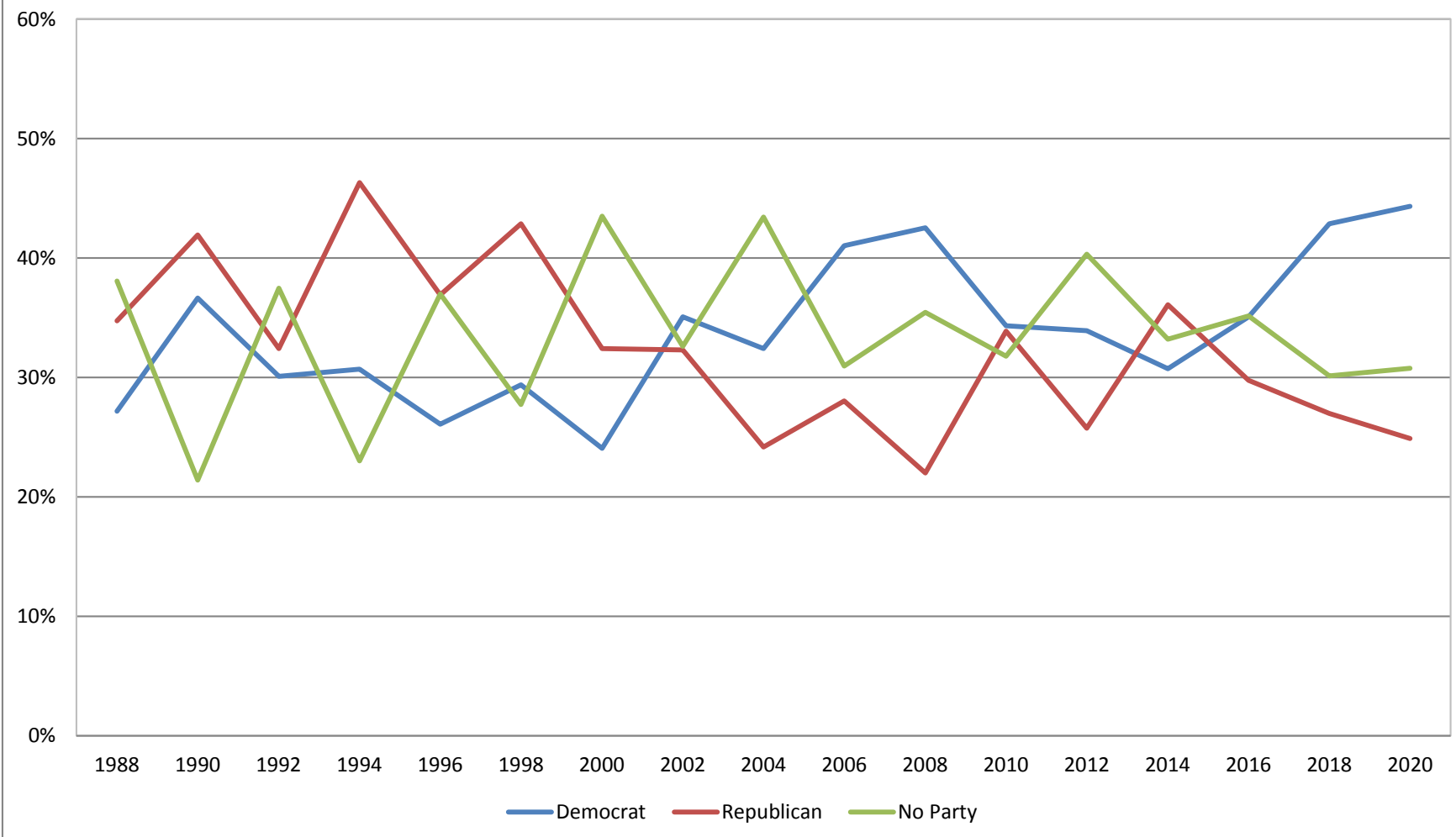


Figure 12b: Distribution of Iowa Absentee Voters in Age Group 25-34 by Party in Election Years Since 1988

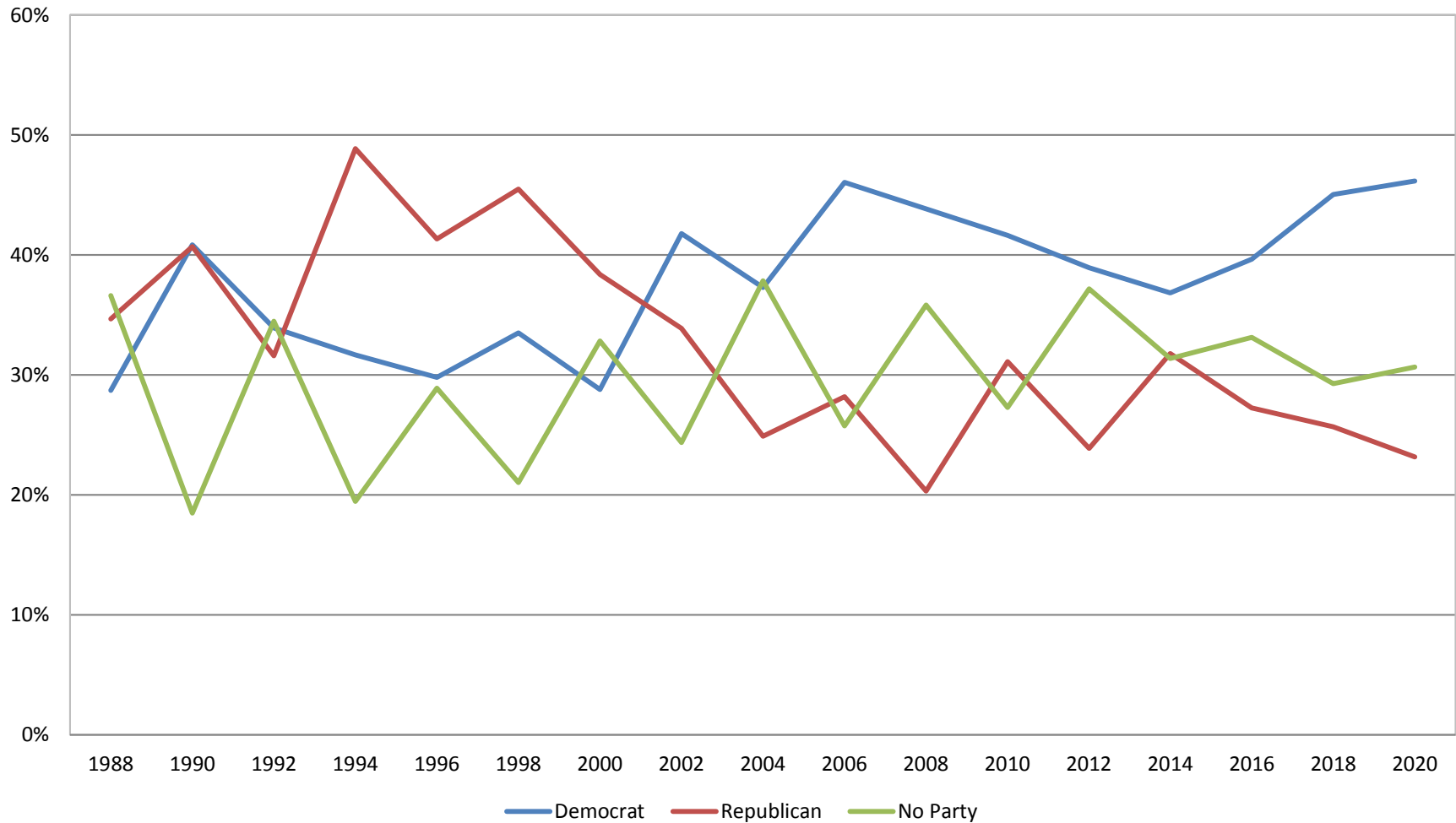


Figure 12c: Distribution of Iowa Absentee Voters in Age Group 35-49 by Party in Election Years Since 1988

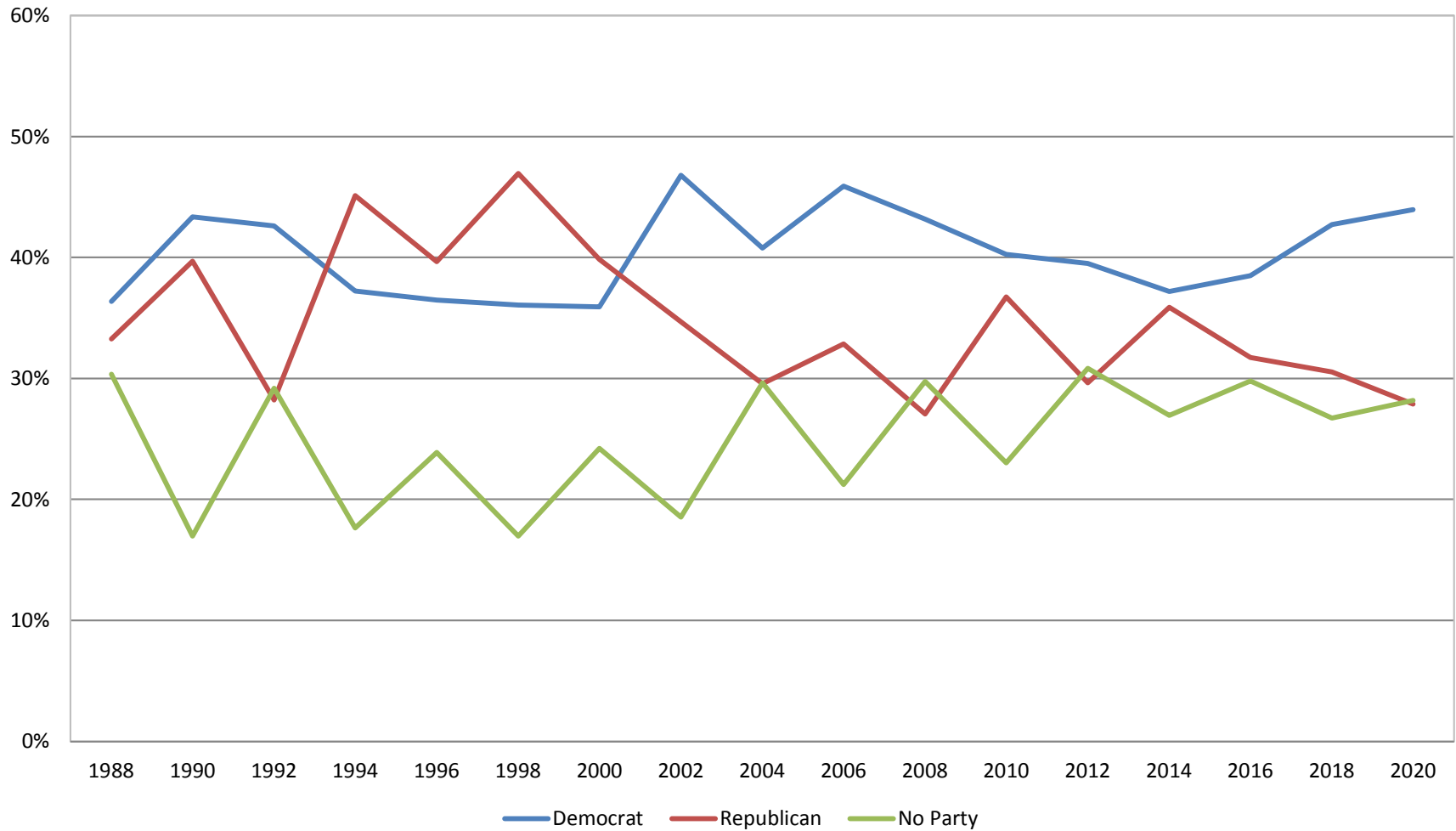


Figure 12d: Distribution of Iowa Absentee Voters in Age Group 50-64 by Party in Election Years Since 1988

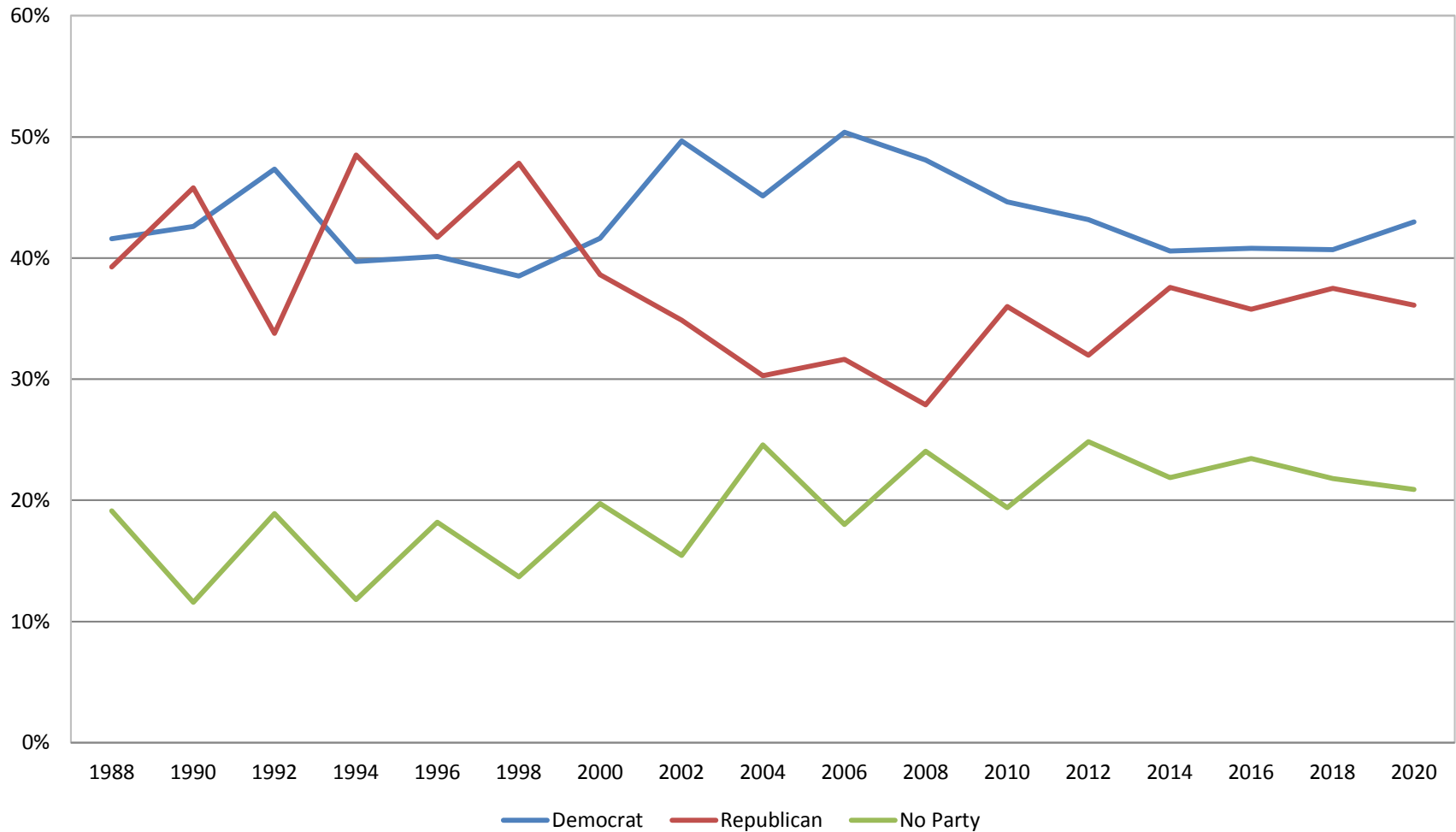


Figure 12e: Distribution of Iowa Absentee Voters in Age Group 65 & Over by Party in Election Years Since 1988

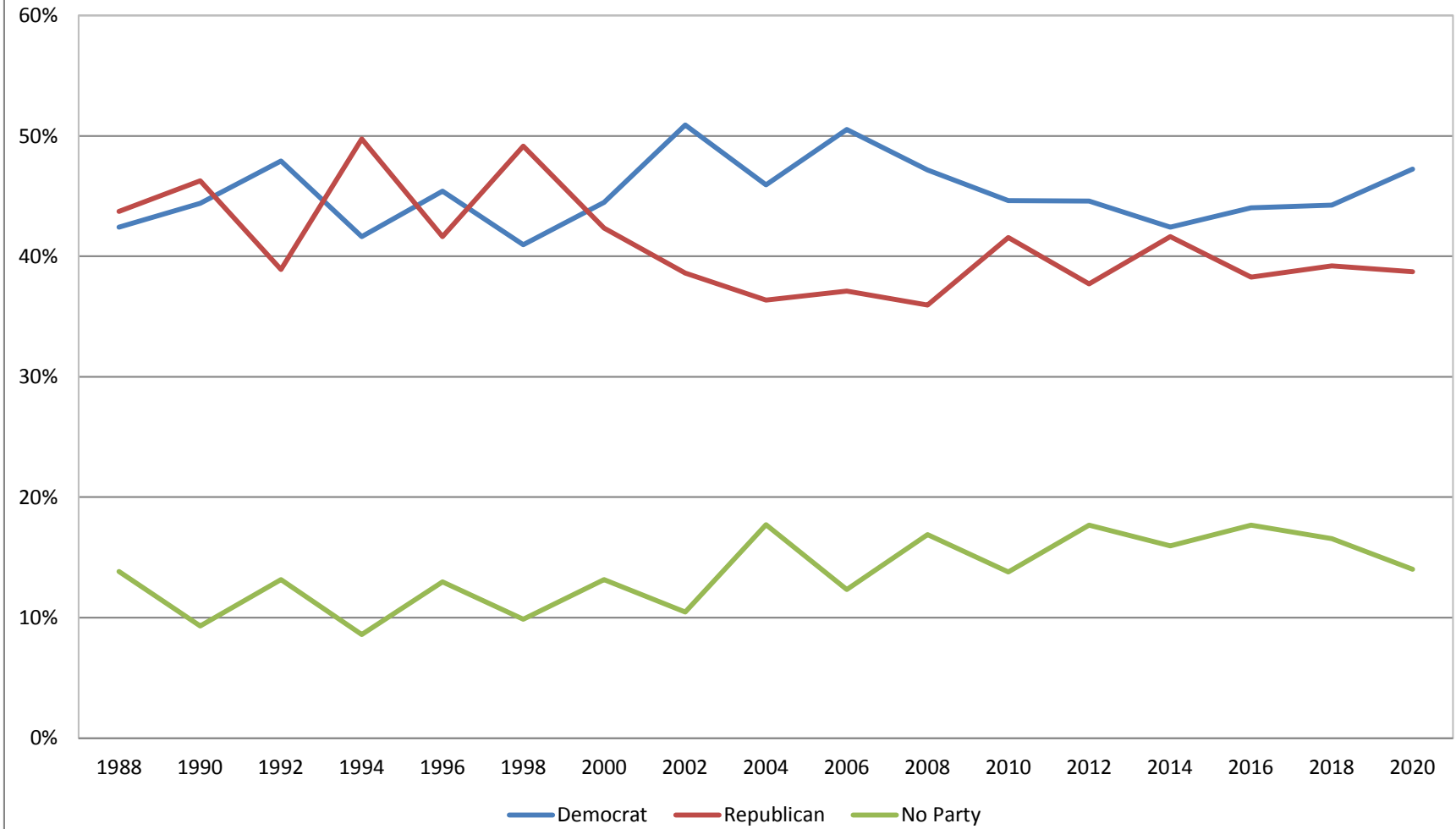


Figure 13a: Percentage of Iowa Voters in Age Group 18-24 Voting Absentee by Sex and Party in Election Years Since 1988

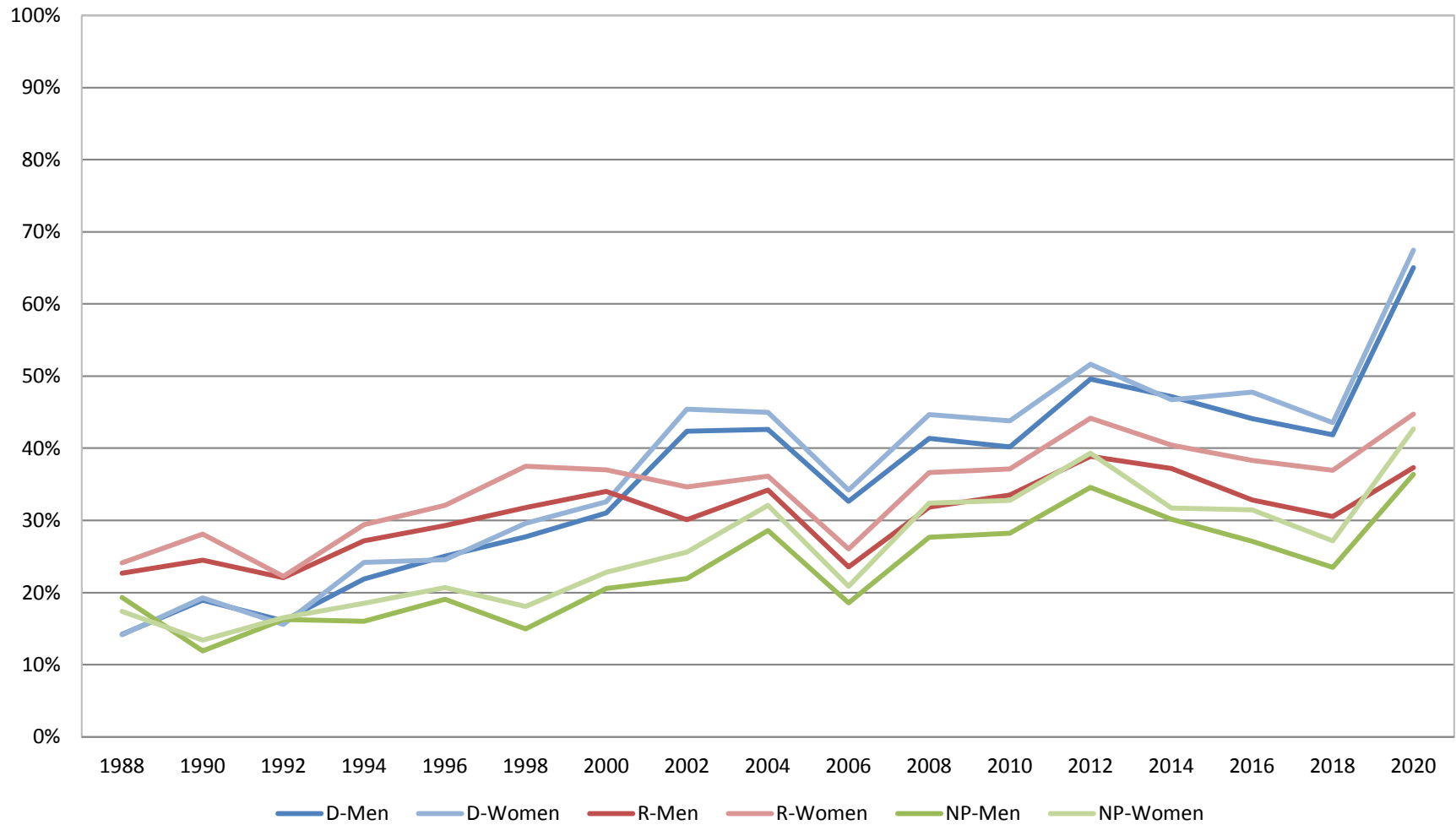


Figure 13b: Percentage of Iowa Voters in Age Group 25-34 Voting Absentee by Sex and Party in Election Years Since 1988

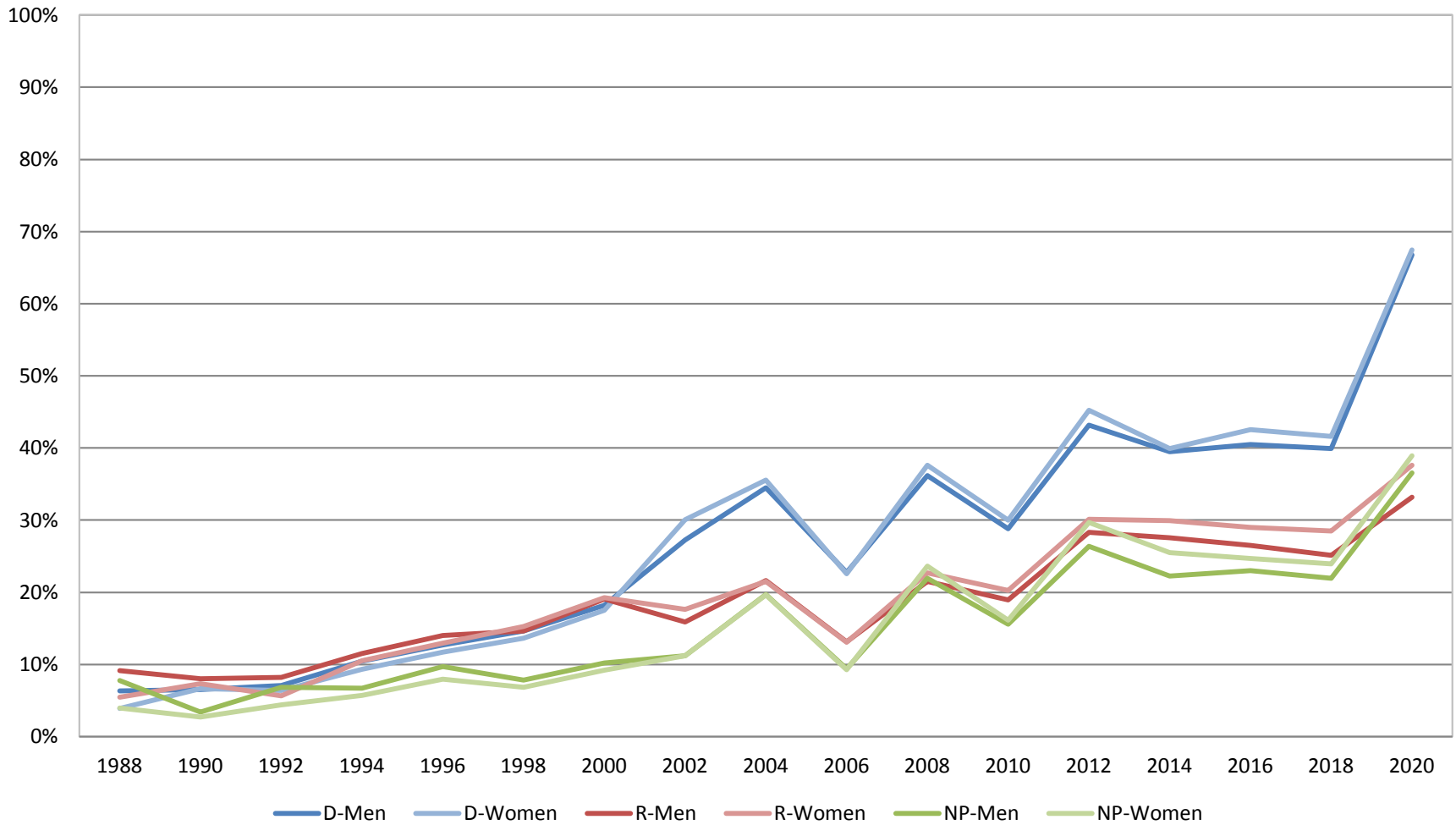


Figure 13c: Percentage of Iowa Voters in Age Group 35-49 Voting Absentee by Sex and Party in Election Years Since 1988

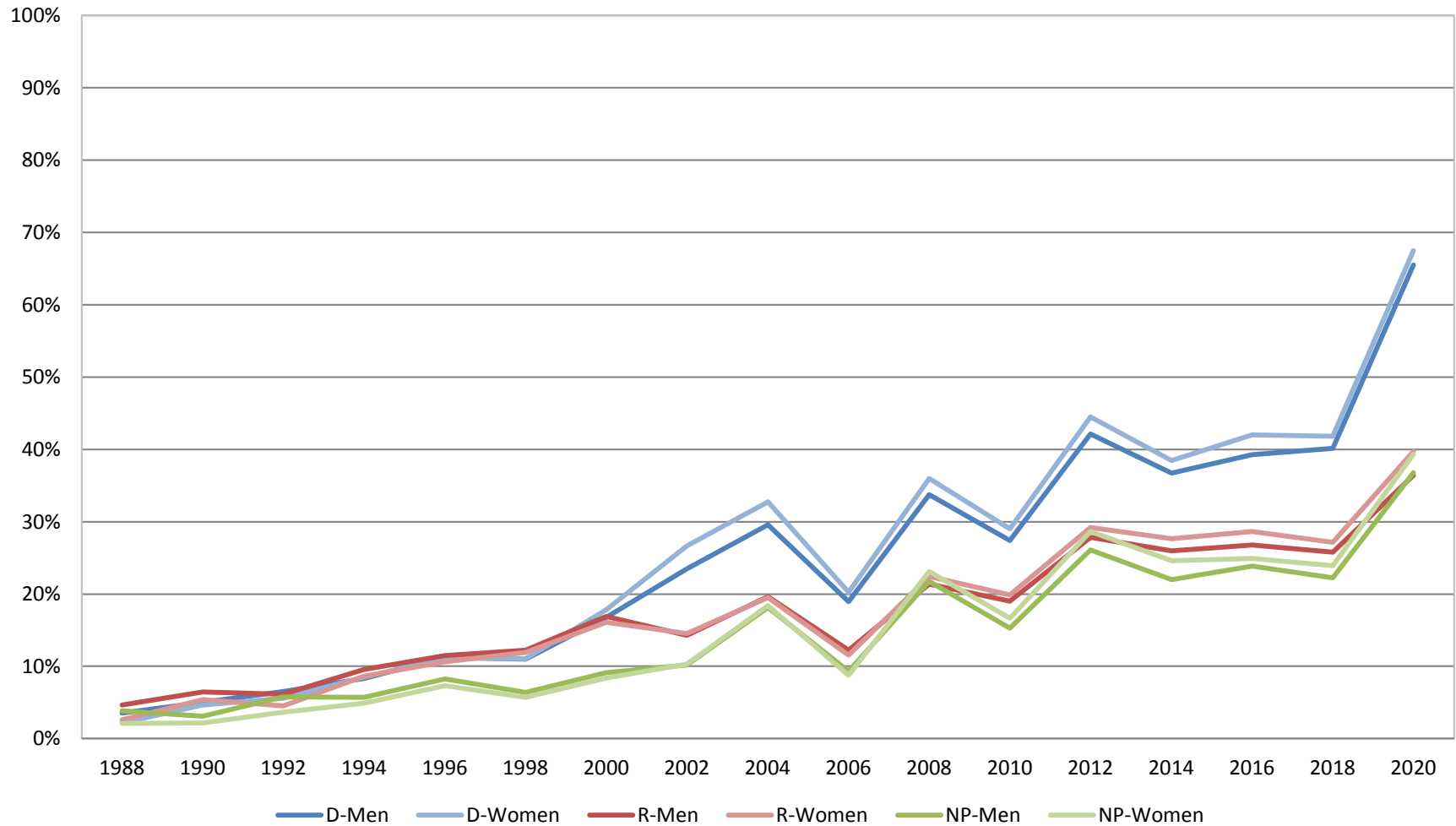


Figure 13d: Percentage of Iowa Voters in Age Group 50-64 Voting Absentee by Sex and Party in Election Years Since 1988

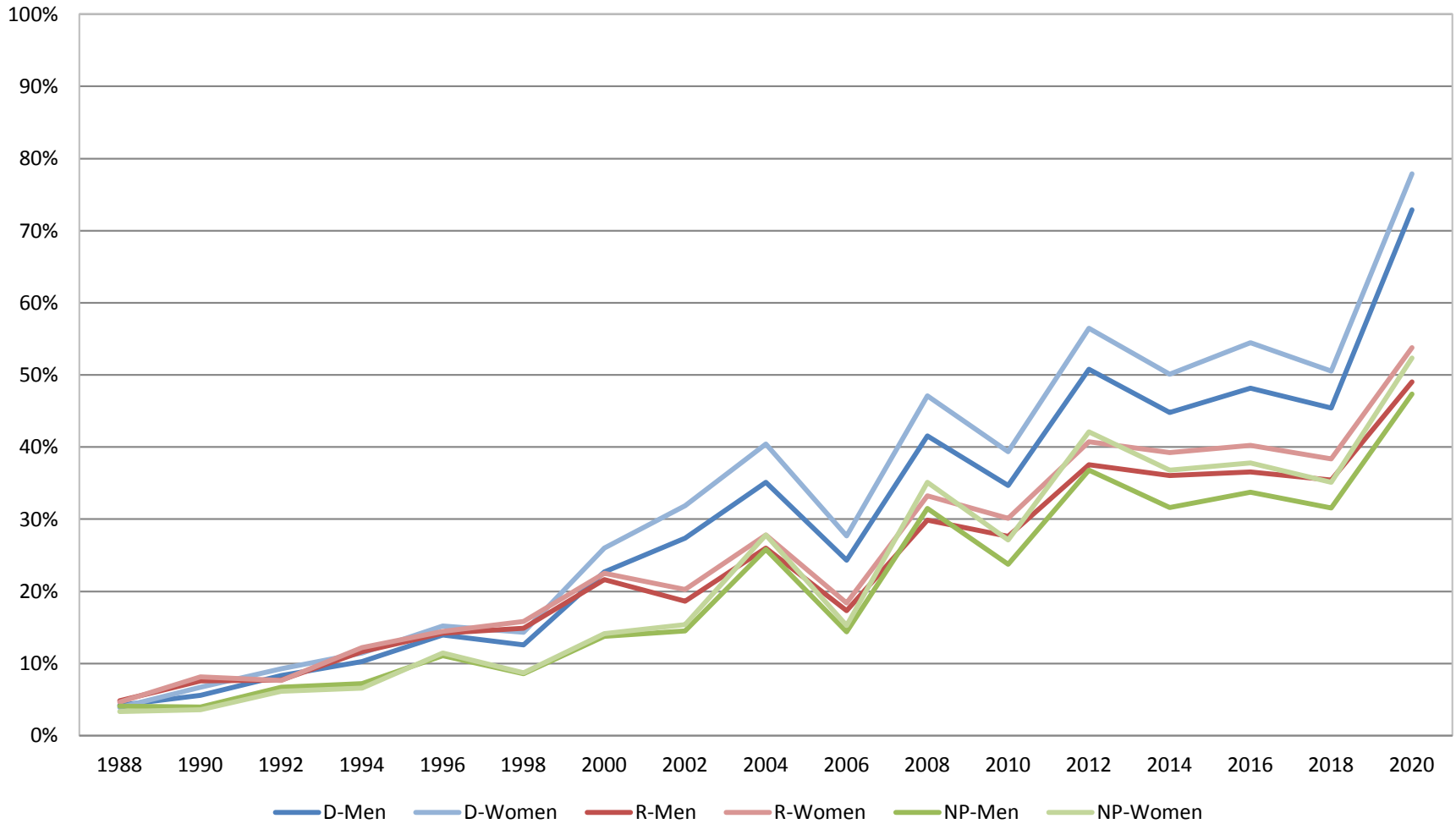


Figure 13e: Percentage of Iowa Voters in Age Group 65 & Over Voting Absentee by Sex and Party in Election Years Since 1988

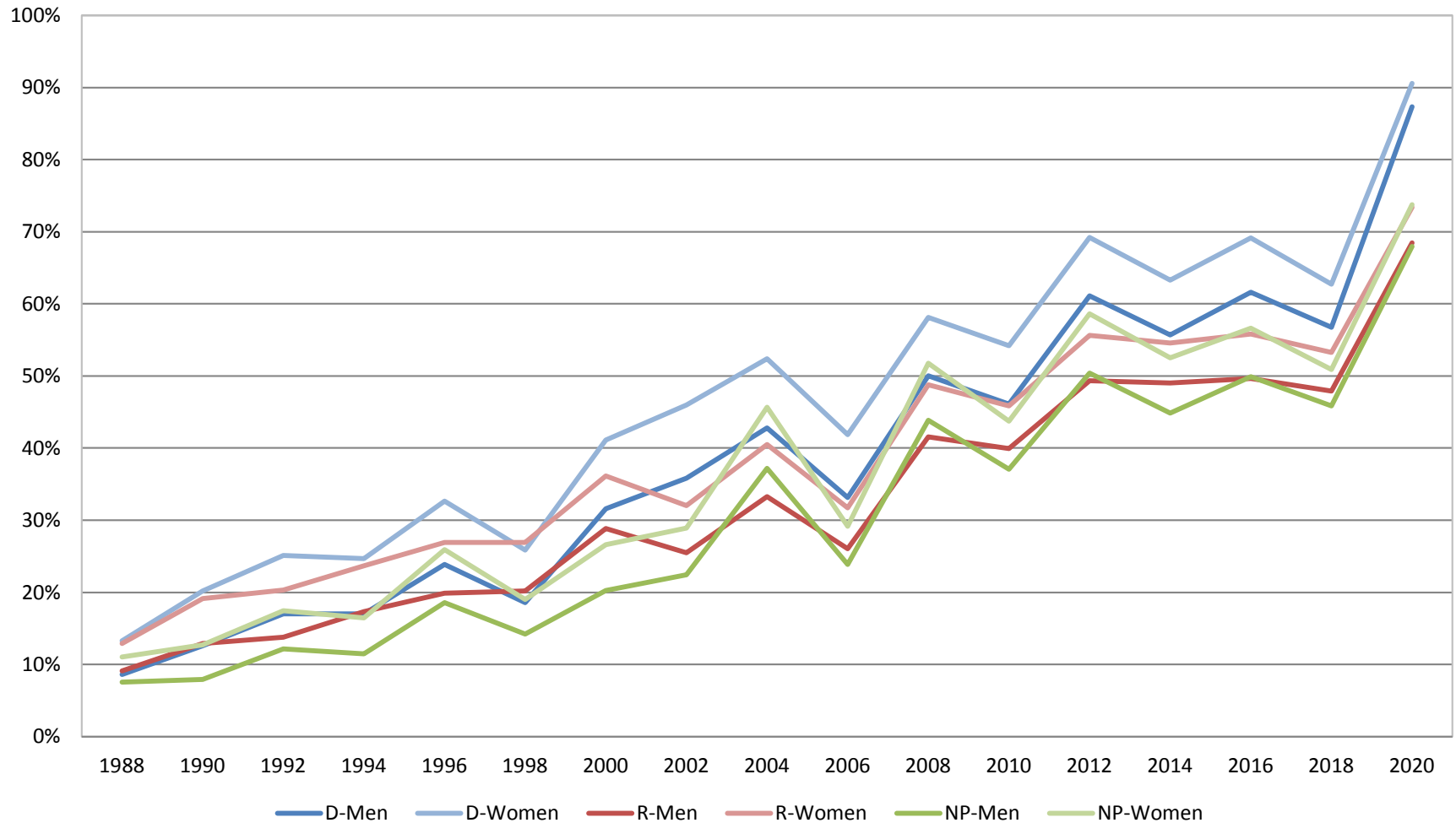


Figure 14a: Distribution of Iowa Absentee Voters in Age Group 18-24 by Sex and Party in Election Years Since 1988

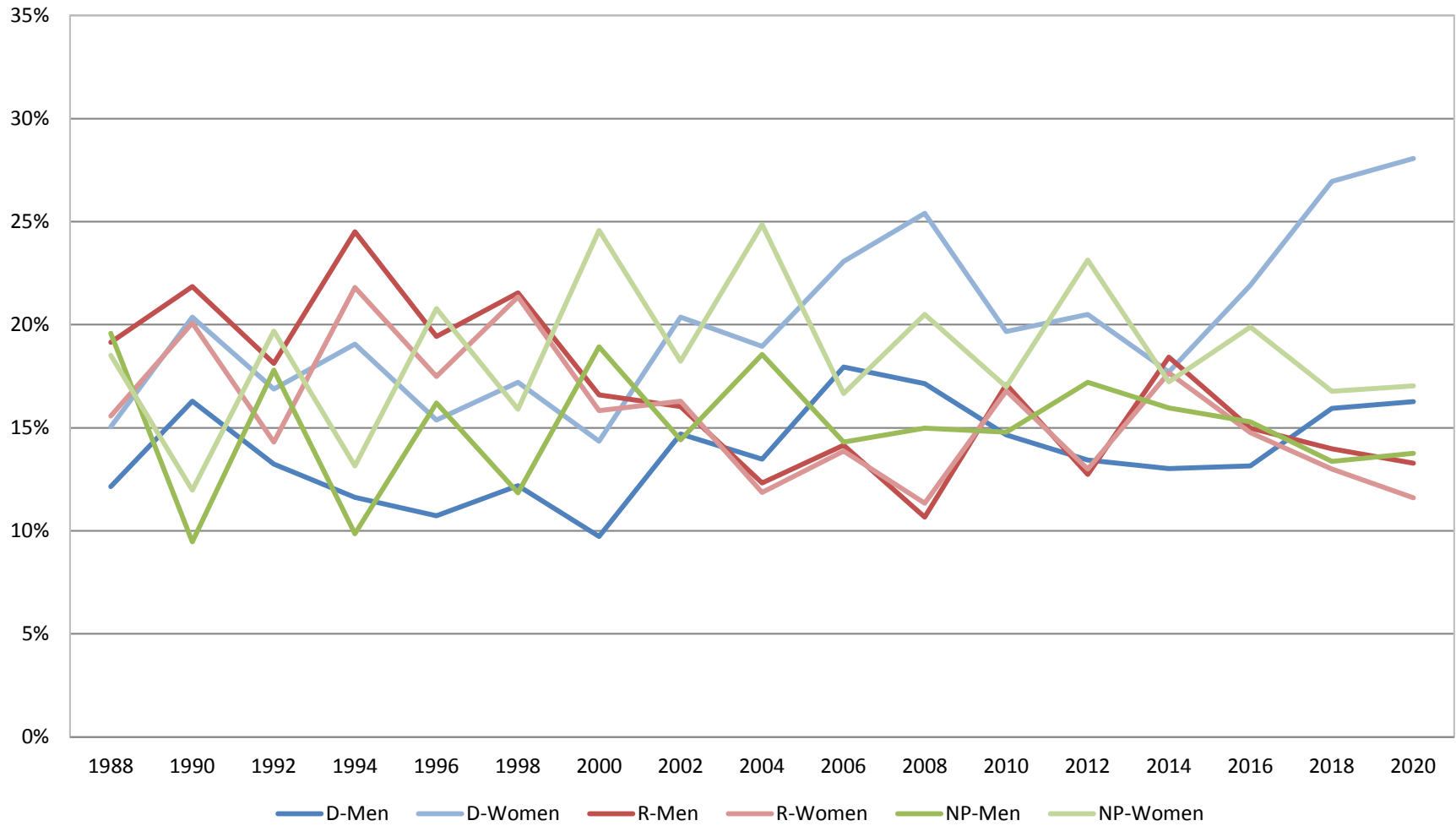


Figure 14b: Distribution of Iowa Absentee Voters in Age Group 25-34 by Sex and Party in Election Years Since 1988

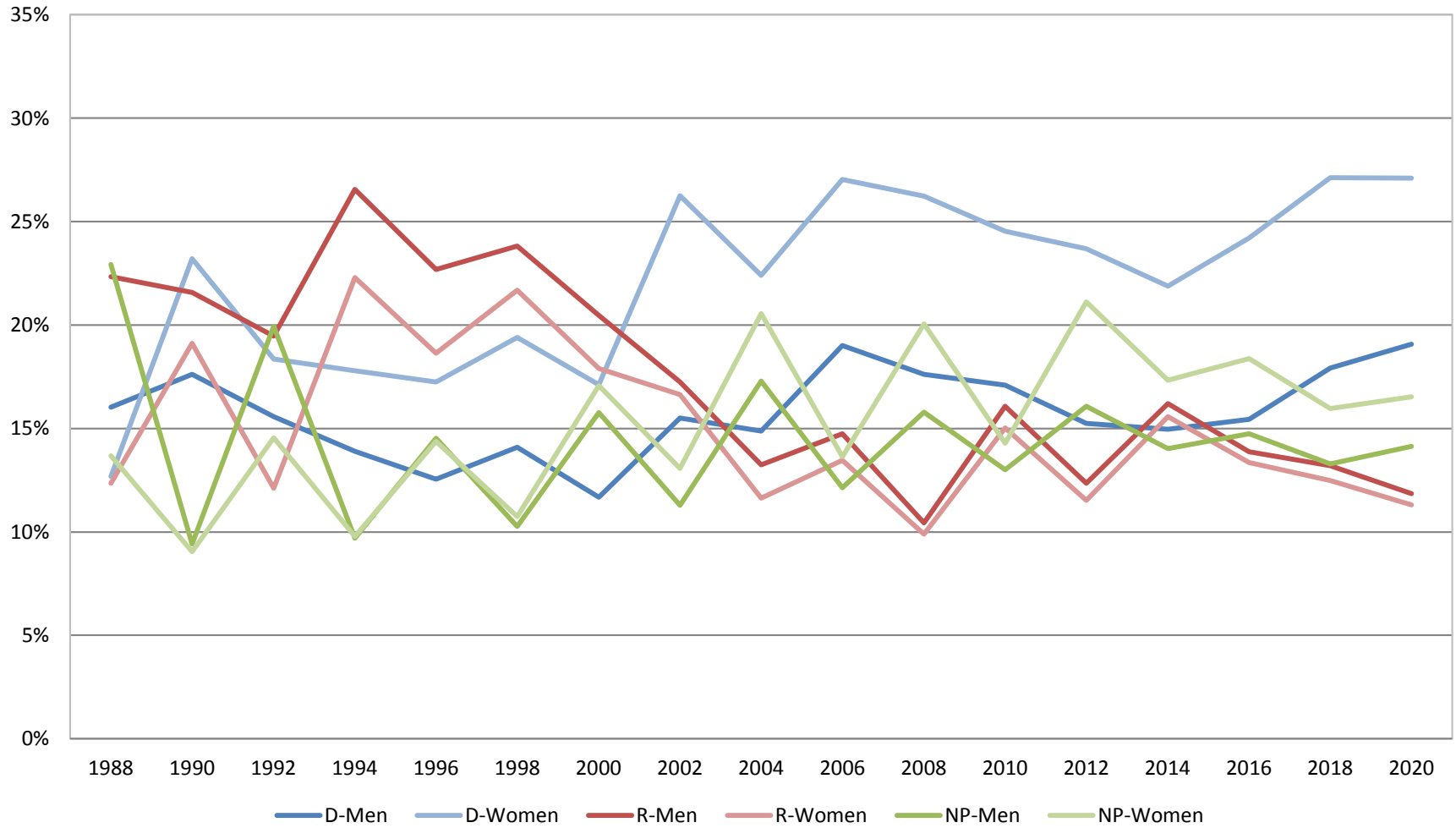


Figure 14c: Distribution of Iowa Absentee Voters in Age Group 35-49 by Sex and Party in Election Years Since 1988

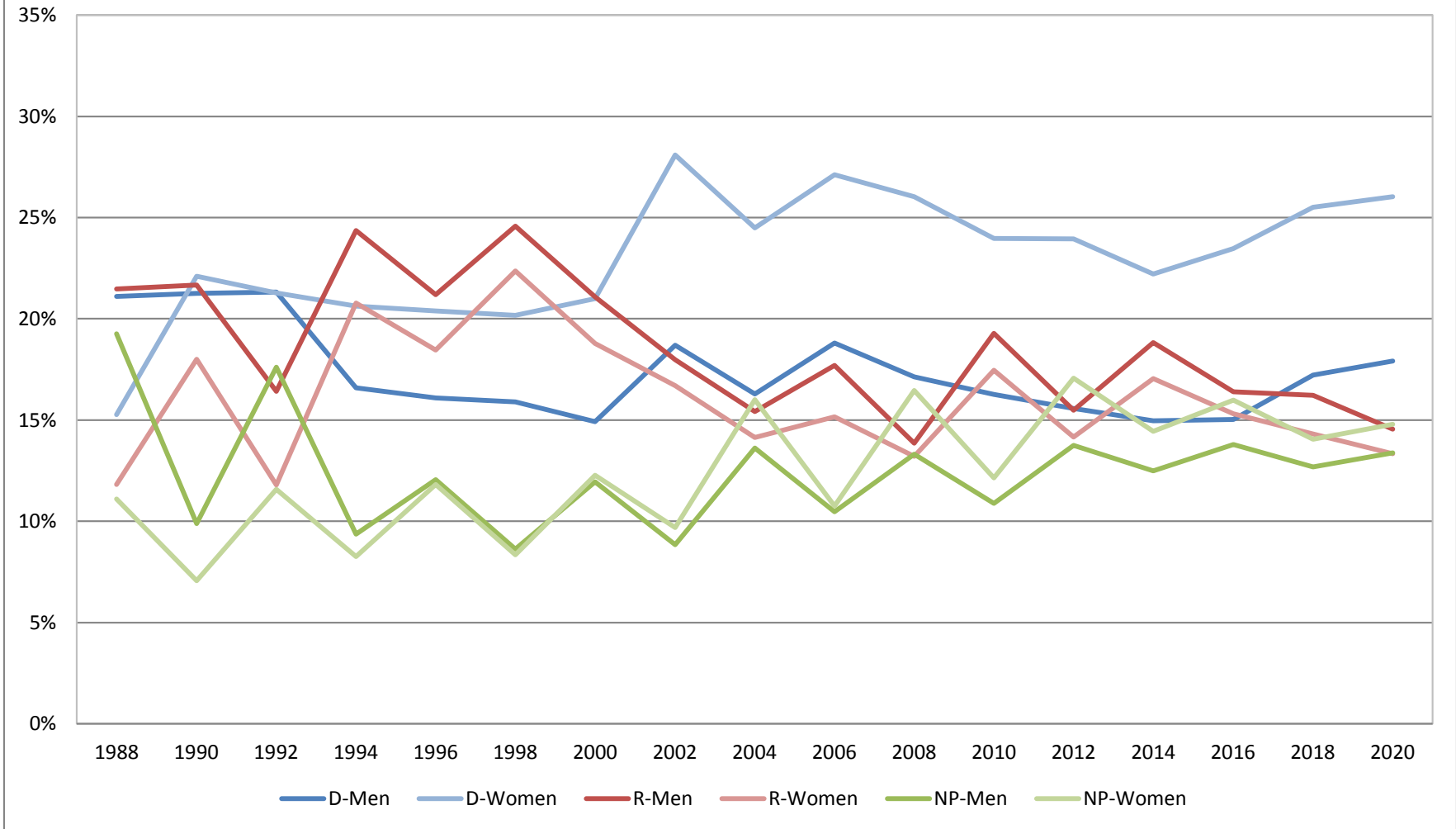


Figure 14d: Distribution of Iowa Absentee Voters in Age Group 50-64 by Sex and Party in Election Years Since 1988

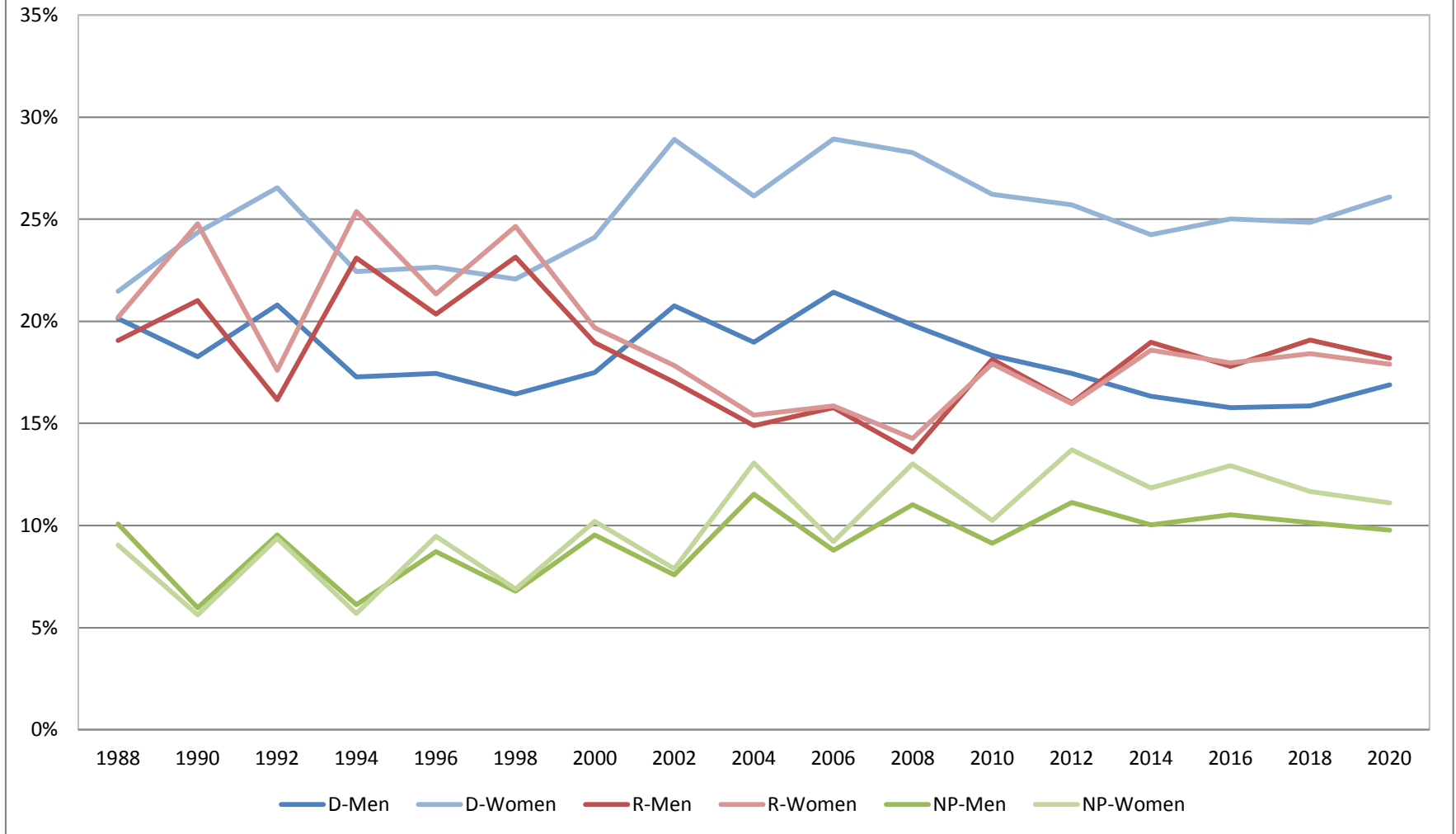


Figure 14e: Distribution of Iowa Absentee Voters in Age Group 65 & Over by Sex and Party in Election Years Since 1988

