

Iowa Voting Series, Paper 11: An Examination of Absentee Voting in Johnson County

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Abstract

This is the eleventh paper in a series examining aspects of voting in Iowa. In the sixth and tenth papers in the series I examined aspects of absentee voting in Iowa as a whole. Because of the availability of more specific data, in this paper I focus on absentee voting in Johnson County. Although Johnson County is not representative of Iowa counties in general, its population size, unusual distribution of registered voters, and the fact that it is home to the University of Iowa make it an interesting case. The findings show that voters in Johnson County have been more likely to cast absentee votes than Iowans as a whole. In addition, despite the emphasis on in-person early voting, traditional mailed absentee ballots are still very popular. Some differences emerge between the parties regarding a preference for mailed ballots versus in-person early voting. There are also party differences in the return rate for mailed absentee ballots.

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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.

- June 2015: Initial release
- May 2017: Addition of 2016 election data; format changes for most figures
- May 2019: Addition of 2018 election data and related text changes
- May 2021: Addition of 2020 election data and related text changes

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In the sixth paper in this series¹ I examined absentee voting in Iowa in midterm and presidential elections since 1988, in general and by party.² In the tenth paper in the series I took a closer look at the timing of absentee ballot requests and returns. Because the data for the tenth paper were limited I made some references to statistics from Johnson County, Iowa. In this paper I take a closer look at several aspects of absentee voting in Johnson County. 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

Unlike prior papers, data for this examination were primarily gathered from the Election Returns and Statistics page of the Johnson County Auditor's website.³ This page provides links to Johnson County election results for a variety of primary and general election contests, including those for presidential and midterm elections. Some additional data were gathered from the Election Results & Statistics page of the Iowa Secretary of State's website.⁴ Although some of the Johnson County data go as far back as the 1970 election, there have been variations over the years in terms of the types and extent of information presented. As a result, although some of the statistics examined here begin in 1974, most do not start until 1992.

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

² When I refer to some aspect of turnout or voting in "presidential elections" or "midterm elections" it is a shorthand way of referring to turnout or voting in that year in general, not for a particular contest. Certainly some who vote in a particular election do not do so for every contest. As noted below, the data considered here are from state-wide or countywide statistics regarding absentee ballots not from any particular contest except when a particular race is used as an example.

³ https://www.johnson-county.com/dept_auditor_elections.aspx?id=14782.

⁴ <http://sos.iowa.gov/elections/results/index.html>.

The absentee statistics examined here are usually obtained from Early Voting Statistics links on the page for each of the general elections, though the structure of the pages and locations of the links varies somewhat.⁵ Despite these variations, beginning in 1992 all the Johnson County election reports indicate the number of absentee ballots requested and returned for each of the three parties in Iowa: Democrats, Republicans, and No Party voters.⁶ The available reports also include any other political parties or organizations that were recognized at the time. This includes the Reform Party for 1998, the Green Party for 2002, the Libertarian Party for 2018, and the Green and Libertarian Non-Party Political Organizations from 2008 on.⁷ The number of voters beyond Democrats, Republicans, and No Party voters, however labeled, is quite small relatively speaking. Thus, for purposes of this paper I will add data regarding voters in these other categories to that of No Party voters.⁸

Absentee Voting in Iowa

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

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

Various reforms over the years aimed at increasing voter turnout also affected absentee voting. The reforms generally removed request deadlines and the requirement of a

⁵ For example, the election results page for the 1992 presidential election can be found at <http://www.johnson-county.com/auditor/returns/1990/9211rtn.htm>. The Early Voting Statistics link is near the top of that page.

⁶ “No Party” is what Iowa calls its independents. It seems a little odd to refer to unaffiliated No Party voters as a party, so in earlier versions of some papers in the series I referred to the party registration choices as “categories.” That proved somewhat cumbersome, so I will use “party” to include No Party voters.

⁷ See the first paper in the series for more details on voter registration in Iowa.

⁸ Labels in the figures will be “No Party+Other” but I will just use “No Party” in the text to refer to the combined group of No Party and Other voters.

justification for the absentee ballot.⁹ Moreover, what is often referred to as “early voting” has been added to the basic notion of absentee voting as a way for voters to cast their ballots before Election Day.

Early voting is much like regular voting in that it is done in-person, but there are two main differences. The first is that once a ballot is filled out it is placed in a security envelope that is then stored until Election Day when the envelope is opened and the ballot counted. The second difference is that the early voting does not take place at one’s regular polling place. There are two basic locations for in-person early voting. The first is 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 similar to voting stations available on Election Day, but voters from any precinct can vote at them. As with in-person voting at the county auditor’s office, the ballot is placed in a security envelope and then placed in a ballot box that is stored until Election Day.

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

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

Despite the popularity of in-person early voting, more traditional absentee ballots are still available and used by many people. Procedurally, although no reason need be

⁹ Here is a link to the 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.

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, the Secretary of State is the elected official in charge of elections. To make things a bit more confusing, Iowa also has an Auditor of State, whose duties are financial.

¹¹ 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.

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 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 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 requests for mailed absentee ballots from voters. The general goal is to boost turnout for a particular party or candidate. Campaign or party workers are usually trained in the procedures for requesting an absentee ballot and will do so while going door to door or at a location with heavy foot traffic (again, grocery stores, etc.). An additional goal 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. 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 Johnson County Auditor 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. Tracking absentee ballot requests has become sufficiently popular that, as noted above, the Iowa Secretary of State now includes Daily Absentee Statistics among its posted election information. The reasonable assumption

¹² The earliest one can request a mailed ballot is 120 days before the election. See the Johnson County Auditor's website (http://www.johnson-county.com/dept_auditor.aspx?id=14448).

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.

underlying the focus on early voting is that those who cast absentee ballots will vote for their party's candidates, which means such votes are already "in the bank," so to speak, prior to Election Day. Along these lines, stories following the 2012 presidential election noted that Republican candidate Mitt Romney had more votes for him cast on Election Day in Iowa, but the lead amassed by Democrats as a result of their early voting efforts on behalf of President Obama was too much to overcome.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵

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.

Before turning to an examination of the available data I need to comment on the terminology used below. As noted above, referring to "absentee" voting usually calls to mind the traditional mailed ballot. Although that would certainly count as an early vote, the term "early voting" usually refers to an in-person vote, either at the county auditor's office or a satellite voting station. Of course, those two types of early voting still require a request for a ballot and a returned ballot. 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 terms "in-person" or just "early voting" when referring to early voting that takes place in-person at county auditor's offices or at satellite voting stations.

Johnson County is an Outlier

I focus on absentee voting in Johnson County for this paper for two main reasons. First, because I mentioned some early voting statistics from Johnson County in the tenth paper I thought it would be worthwhile to take a closer look at them. Second, at a practical level, more statistics are available for Johnson County than were available state-wide. Again, the state-wide data on absentee voting examined in the tenth paper

¹⁴ See, for example, <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/dec/06/news/la-pn-obama-early-voting-key-victory-20121205>.

¹⁵ See, for example, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/upshot/north-carolina-early-vote-tracker.html>.

were only available for the general elections since 2010. Data for the sixth paper went back to the 1988 election, but did not distinguish between traditional mailed absentee ballots and in-person early voting. In contrast, Johnson County has data on mailed and in-person early voting by party since at least 1992.

On the other hand, Johnson County cannot be considered a typical Iowa county in terms of its politics. I think it will be useful to examine the data from Johnson County, but one must keep in mind that patterns and results may be based on factors not present for other Iowa counties. Johnson County (with Iowa City and the University of Iowa) has the fourth largest population of Iowa's 99 counties behind Polk (Des Moines), Linn (Cedar Rapids), and Scott (Davenport).¹⁶ Johnson County is also home to the University of Iowa, one of three Regents universities along with the University of Northern Iowa (Black Hawk County, fifth in population) and Iowa State University (Story County, eighth in population). Although these factors are related to politics, a more direct measure is the voter registration in the county.

Johnson County has the largest percentage of registered Democrats of Iowa's 99 counties. State-wide, as of December 2020 Republicans led Democrats in voter registrations by about 26,000 and No Party voters trailed Democrats by about 26,000.¹⁷ In Johnson County, however, Democrats have more than twice the number of registered voters than Republicans (52,582 to 18,539) and about 24,000 more than No Party voters.¹⁸ Johnson County is widely regarded as the most liberal county in Iowa. Even some Democrats jokingly refer to it as the "People's Republic of Johnson County."

Taking a closer look at voter registrations, Figure 1 shows the distribution of registered voters in Iowa in general elections since 1982.¹⁹ Previous papers have discussed the changes in voter registrations since 1982, but despite lead changes among the parties during the early part of the period, from 1998 to 2018 there were always more No Party voters in the state.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of registered voters in Johnson County in general elections since 1992. There are several things to notice about Figure 2. First, with the exceptions of the 2000 and 2002 elections, there have been more registered Democrats in the county than No Party voters and always far more than Republican voters. Second,

¹⁶ See here for a list of Iowa counties by population: http://www.iowa-demographics.com/counties_by_population.

¹⁷ As noted in prior papers, prior to the June 2020 primary No Party voters had led both Democrats and Republicans since 1994. Because of the pandemic, every voter was mailed an absentee ballot request form for the primary. About 60,000 No Party voters used the form to request a party ballot, which automatically changed their party registration.

¹⁸ These figures are based on the December, 2020, voter registration data found here: <https://sos.iowa.gov/elections/pdf/VRStatsArchive/2020/CoDec20.pdf>.

¹⁹ 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. This is the same figure as Figure 2 from the second paper in the series.

the general growth in the county is reflected by the fact that all three lines are higher in 2020 than 1992. Third, the Republican registrations remained fairly constant, only rising slightly as the county population grew.

Given how Democrats dominate voter registrations in Johnson County it will come as no surprise that they have far larger numbers of absentee voting. Thus, much of the discussion that follows focuses more on percentages for comparison purposes.

Absentee Voting Percentages

As an additional point of comparison, Figure 3 shows the absentee voting percentages of Johnson County and Iowa as a whole. The state-wide data come from the Iowa Secretary of State's website, which only has data back to 1988 on its main election results page.²⁰ Data on the Johnson County Auditor's website go back to 1974 for this percentage. The Johnson County data clearly show how the changes to absentee voting have dramatically increased the number of voters taking advantage of these options. Between 1974 and 1988 the percentage of absentee voting was well below 10%. From 1988 to 1996 there was a steady and dramatic increase in the number of absentee votes, even during midterm elections. The state-wide data begin in 1988 and also show absentee voting quickly increasing state-wide, though not as quickly as in Johnson County and a large gap develops between the two. With the 1998 election we see both the Johnson County and state-wide percentages starting to follow the familiar pattern of lower percentages in midterm years, but with a generally increasing trend until the 2016 and 2018 elections.

Because of the pandemic, in 2020 voters were strongly encouraged to use absentee voting. This included sending every voter an absentee ballot request form. As can be seen in Figure 3, this dramatically increased the percentage of absentee voting. Interestingly, however, the percentage in 2020 was close to an extension of the trend line prior to the 2016 and 2018 elections.

Since 1988, when the percentage of Iowa voters using early voting was actually slightly higher than the percentage in Johnson County (6.50% to 6.07%), the percentage of Johnson County voters using mail or in-person early voting has increased dramatically and has averaged about 12% more than the state as a whole (and keep in mind that the state data contains the Johnson County figures). Over half of the Johnson County voters who cast a ballot did so by some form of early voting in five of the past seven elections, reaching a high of nearly 72.37% in 2020. Of the two exceptions, in 2010 the percentage was 47.99% and in 2018 it was 49.98%. In contrast, state-wide voters broke

²⁰ Again, the main elections results page for elections starting in 2000 is at <http://sos.iowa.gov/elections/results/index.html>. Results for elections before 2000 are archived here <https://sos.iowa.gov/elections/results/archive.html>.

the 40% mark in only the past five elections, and 50% only once in 2020. In a previous version of this paper written before the 2016 election I suggested that Johnson County might break 60% for the 2016 election. As you can see from Figure 3, that did not happen. The unusual nature of the 2016 presidential election and the fact that Republicans did not emphasize absentee voting as much as in prior elections resulted in a smaller than usual gain over the state-wide and county percentages for the 2014 midterm election. It is hard to say whether Johnson County would have broken the 60% mark in 2020 had it not been for the pandemic. It will be interesting to see whether absentee voting remains at 2020 levels in future elections.

Johnson County Returned Ballot Percentages

Figure 4 shows the percentage of returned ballots (mailed and in-person) in elections since 1992 for Johnson County. Recall that with traditional absentee voting ballots would be mailed to the voters who requested them. The voters would then fill out the ballots and return them to the county auditor. Some ballots would not be returned, or would be returned late and not counted. With in-person early voting, however, the return effectively occurs at the same time the ballot is requested. I will focus on the distinction between mailed and in-person returned ballots more below, but Figure 4 shows the return percentages for all forms of early votes combined.

Note that the vertical scale in Figure 4 begins at 84%. Thus, although we see some variations in the lines, all but two data points are above 90% (and one of the two is 89.89%). The black line shows the combined percentage for all voters and the colored lines separate the percentages for Democrats, Republicans, and No Party voters. The combined line starts very high; the first five elections are all above 97%. Although none of the percentages is below 90%, there is a drop in three consecutive elections (2002, 2004, and 2006) before an increase and the start of the pattern of higher return rates in presidential years. One reason for the slight drop in the percentage of returned ballots after 2000 may actually be the increased attention campaigns give to them. To the extent campaigns are working harder to get less reliable voters to request traditional absentee ballots, there is likely an increased chance that those same voters would be less reliable or likely to return them.

Looking at the percentages for each party it is no surprise that the line for Democrats most closely tracks the combined line given how they dominate voter registrations in the county. From 1992 through 1998 Democrats had the highest return rate. The rate for Republicans was very slightly higher in 2000 (98.83% to 98.78%). In 2002 the return rate for Democrats dropped several percentage points and hovered around 94% until 2008 when we see it begin the familiar pattern of higher rates in presidential elections and drops in midterm years. The Republican return rate started out a bit below that of Democrats until taking that tiny lead in 2000. From 2000 through 2014, Republicans consistently had the highest return rate, though the difference was sometimes within

half a percentage point. In 2016 Democrats once again had the highest return rate, but Republicans had a slightly higher rate again in 2018 (97.32% for Republicans and 97.25% for Democrats). Democrats again had a higher return rate in 2020 by about half a point. We may be seeing the start of a pattern where Republicans do a bit better in midterm elections and Democrats in presidential elections.

No Party voters consistently had the lowest return rate (though only 0.06% behind Republicans in 1996). Like Democrats, their return rate dipped sharply following the 2000 election but did not recover until 2008. There was some variability based on midterm versus presidential elections for the next few elections until a large drop for 2014. There was a significant recovery for 2016 and No Party voters have been only a bit below the other parties since then.

Two final observations can be made about the percentages in Figure 4. First, a consistent pattern of higher return rates in presidential years and lower rates in midterm years does not seem to start for any of the parties until the 2006 election. There are hints of such a pattern for both Democrats and Republicans in prior elections, but the pattern is clearest after 2006. One possible reason for this is that once the parties began to focus more on absentee voting it took some time for them to work out a system that was particularly successful in presidential years.

Second, the drop for all three parties for the 2014 midterm is rather large – and somewhat surprising. The return rate for all three parties is below their corresponding rates for both the 2006 and 2010 elections. Unlike the 2010 election, 2014 did not have the feel of a wave election for Republicans, so it seems a little odd that the return rate for Democrats and No Party voters dropped by several percentage points from the prior midterm. This is particularly so given the focus in 2014 on the US Senate race between Joni Ernst and Bruce Braley, which was one of the most closely watched in the country. Although Ernst eventually won by about eight percentage points, the race seemed very close until the end and that should have provided additional incentive for absentee voters to return their ballots. On the other hand, it may be that more of those requesting mailed absentee ballots are those who are less likely to return them. This leads to a consideration of the differences between traditional absentee ballots and in-person early voting. The good news for Democrats and No Party voters was that the 2016 return rates were their highest since the 2000 election. The rate for Republicans recovered in 2016 as well, but was just slightly below their percentage for 2012. Again, although the return rate for all three parties was higher in 2020 than 2016, it remains to be seen the extent to which that higher rate will be maintained in coming elections.

Mail and In-Person Early Voting

Figure 5 shows the number of early votes cast via traditional mailed absentee ballots and in-person early voting along with the combined total.²¹ The black line for the total number of mailed and in-person early votes clearly shows the familiar up and down pattern between presidential and midterm elections. The blue line for in-person voting also shows this pattern. The red line for mailed ballots does as well, but to a lesser extent. For the most part, there have been more in-person early votes in Johnson County than mailed ballots. This is not surprising as the Johnson County Auditor usually provides many opportunities to vote at satellite early voting stations.²² Nevertheless, there were four instances during this period when there were more mailed ballots: 2002, 2004, 2014, and 2020. Interestingly, if you look back to Figure 4, those elections correspond to three of the five elections with the lowest return rates. The 2006 election also had a low return rate, particularly for No Party voters, but that was also when the number of mailed ballots was only just below that of in-person votes. As previously noted, with in-person voting the return rate should be nearly 100% (barring any spoiled ballots or other technical problems). Thus, given a certain percentage of mailed ballots that are not returned, as the number of mailed ballots increases relative to in-person early voting, the overall return rate will decrease. This relationship is easily seen for the 2014 election where the number of mailed ballots was the highest ever for a midterm election and exceeded the number of in-person votes. Even assuming the rate of return for mailed ballots was normal for the 2014 election, the greater number of such ballots likely explains the sharp drop in the overall return rate for 2014 seen in Figure 4.

Figure 6 shows the percentage of in-person early voting (versus mailed ballots) for the three parties. The assumption here is that in-person voting and mailed ballots equal 100%. Thus, as the in-person voting percentage increases the percentage of mailed ballots would decrease (and equal 100% minus the in-person percentage).

The first thing to notice about the lines in Figure 6 is that they do not conform to a clear pattern. We do see the general decrease of in-person voting for 2002, 2004, 2014, and 2020 that was mentioned previously. On the other hand, we do not see any clear distinction between presidential and midterm elections, at least for Democrats and No Party voters. Republicans have the most regular pattern and they show a preference for

²¹ The data on the Johnson County Auditor's website distinguish between domestic and military/overseas mail. The number of military or overseas ballots is quite small and will be combined with the domestic mail figures for examination here. The data also contain a separate early voting category for "Nursing Home" that is not included in the posted "in-person total." The Nursing Home numbers are also quite small and will be combined with the satellite figures for examination here.

²² Here is the satellite voting schedule for the 2012 election: <http://www.johnson-county.com/auditor/returns/1211sat.htm>. The schedule includes several dorms and other locations on or near the University of Iowa campus. That makes it easier for students to vote, but also for faculty and staff at the university.

in-person early voting in presidential years that decreases in midterm years, but that pattern is less pronounced than we have seen elsewhere.

The lines for Democrats and No Party voters come closest to following each other. Both start out rather high and above the percentage for Republicans. Both then dropped significantly, falling below the Republican percentage before rising again and then falling once more. At different points in the period each of the three parties had the lowest in-person percentage. No Party voters had the highest in-person percentage for all but four elections (2004, 2014, 2016, and 2018). Republicans had the highest in-person percentage for two of those elections and in 2014 No Party voters fell even below Democrats for the first time (and did so again in 2016 and 2018, if only very slightly). Speaking of which, the Democrats' in-person percentage was always below that of No Party voters until 2014. Although there is more mixing of the lines here than we have seen in the figures for other aspects of voting, it comes largely from the variations of the in-person percentages for Democrats and No Party voters while the percentages for Republicans remained fairly stable.

Mailed Ballot Return Percentage

Having mentioned the return percentage for mailed ballots, Figure 7 plots these percentages for the three parties. Note that the vertical scale for Figure 7 begins at 70%.

The pattern in Figure 7 is closer to what we would expect and is consistent with state-wide results found in the tenth paper in the series. We see that No Party voters had the lowest return rate for mailed ballots and there was a clear pattern of higher return rates in presidential elections with the interesting exception of 2018 where No Party voters not only increased their return percentage over 2016, but crossed the 90% mark for only the second time in the period.²³ Democrats and Republicans had higher return rates that were very close to each other. Democrats had a slightly higher return rate for the first three elections in the period, but Republicans had a consistently higher rate between 1998 and 2018. Once again, 2020 changed the pattern as Democrats surged past Republicans.

For all three parties there is a general downward trend in the return rate between 2000 and 2006. This generally corresponds to the increased numbers and percentages of mailed ballots we saw in Figures 5 and 6, but keep in mind that Figure 7 is only showing the return rate for mailed ballots. Thus, unlike the changes in the overall return rate we saw in Figure 4 that were driven to some extent by the relative percentage of mailed versus in-person voting, the differences shown in Figure 7 are the results of changes in the return rate for mailed ballots. Beginning in 2006 all three

²³ It is also interesting that Republicans increased their return percentage in 2018 over 2016. The Democrats' return percentage dropped in 2018, but less so than the prior three midterms.

parties fit the pattern of having a higher return rate in presidential years until 2018. For the most part, this pattern can be explained by the greater intensity and resources available for presidential campaigns. Of course, 2020 was a presidential year, but the increased return rate likely had more to do with the pandemic and particular emphasis on absentee voting.

Location of In-Person Early Voting

The final distinction to consider is the difference between in-person early voting at the county auditor's office or at a satellite voting station. The main difference between the two types of in-person early voting concerns the availability of each. Voting at the county auditor's office begins at the start of the early voting period and can occur whenever the office is open, sometimes including Saturdays and Sundays.²⁴ Satellite voting occurs on select days and in specific locations during the early voting period. As the satellite schedule linked to in a footnote above shows, opportunities for satellite voting occur more frequently as Election Day approaches. As previously noted, satellite times and locations are selected to be a convenience to potential voters who are at particular locations for work or other activities. Not surprisingly, campaigns advertise and encourage their supporters to make use of satellite voting stations in a way that does not occur for voting at the auditor's office. For the most part, choosing to cast an early ballot at the auditor's office takes a bit more effort and planning than waiting to go to a nearby satellite station, at least for those voters who will be near one of the satellite locations on the specified day and time.

Figure 8 shows the percentage of those casting an in-person early vote who did so at the county auditor's office. As with Figure 6, Figure 8 is structured so that as the percentage at the auditor's office increases the corresponding percentage of votes at satellite voting stations decreases (i.e., the percentage at the satellite stations is 100% minus the percentage at the auditor's office). The lines for the three parties largely follow a similar pattern. That pattern, however, does not adhere to differences between presidential and midterm elections. We might expect in-person voting at the auditor's office to decrease in presidential years as more resources are devoted to encouraging people to vote at satellite stations. Although such decreases do occur for 1996 and 2000, for 2004 all three parties show increased voting at the auditor's office. Voting at the auditor's office was down again for 2008 for all three parties, but up again for 2012 and 2016. Democrats and No Party voters increased their percentage again in 2020, but that of Republicans was down. The percentages in midterm elections show a similarly mixed pattern.

²⁴ For 2020, in-person voting at the auditor's office consisted of drive-up voting rather than parking and going into the building.

Although the lines for the three parties do not show consistent differences between presidential and midterm elections, there are three points to make regarding the overall pattern. First, with only four exceptions the lines for the three parties move up or down together. The first exception is for 2002 when Republicans increased their percentage of voting at the auditor's office while Democrats and No Party voters decreased theirs. The second exception occurred for 2006 when Republicans again increased their percentage of voting at the auditor's office while both Democrats and No Party voters decreased slightly. The third exception occurred for No Party voters in 2010 when their percentage at the auditor's office decreased while the percentages for Democrats and Republicans increased. The fourth exception was in 2020 when the Republican percentage dropped while the others increased.

The exceptions for 2002 and 2006 are fairly slight. The exception for 2010 is a bit more dramatic in that the No Party voting at the auditor's office reached an overall low of only 20.19%. The reason for this is likely due to a local ballot issue involving whether 19 and 20 year olds could be present in local bars after 10pm. This issue was of particular importance to college students who apparently made use of satellite voting stations to cast their ballots. From Figure 3a in the fourth paper in the series we saw that state-wide nearly half of all voters in the 18-24 age group were registered as No Party in 2010, which would help explain the large percentage drop at the auditor's office for No Party voters. The exception for 2020 seems odd as Republicans have preferred going to the auditor's office. It may be a stretch, but perhaps some Republicans were less enthusiastic about the drive-up voting at the auditor's office and opted for one of the satellite locations instead.

The second point to make regarding the overall pattern is to note that Republicans were always the most likely to cast in-person early ballots at the auditor's office, No Party voters the least likely, and Democrats in between. A possible explanation for this ordering is based on two political considerations. Between Republicans and Democrats, a reason why Democrats may have a lower percentage of early votes at the auditor's office is that some of the satellite voting locations were selected to take advantage of concentrations of those who are registered Democrats, which decreased their percentage of early votes at the auditor's office.²⁵ As for No Party voters, it makes some sense that their percentage of early votes at the auditor's office is the lowest given the additional effort needed to go to the auditor's office to cast such a ballot and the generally lower political intensity of such voters.²⁶

²⁵ Republicans in the county often complained about this during the prior auditor's tenure, but their attempts to add locations by citizen petition were often unsuccessful.

²⁶ Some No Party voters are certainly very interested in the political process and always vote, but on average, those registered as No Party have had lower turnout rates than those registered as Democrat or Republican, which suggests a lower level of intensity regarding the political process.

Finally, for all three parties we see fairly sharp increases in early voting at the auditor's office for 2012 and 2014, again in 2016 and 2020 for Democrats and No Party voters, and in 2018 for Republicans. Prior to 2014 only Republicans had cast more than half their in-person early votes at the auditor's office (and even then only three times in the prior 11 elections). For 2014, both Democrats and Republicans cast more than half of their in-person early votes at the auditor's office and all three parties had their highest percentage of voting at the auditor's office for the period at that point. Although the Republican increase in 2016 over 2014 was small, the 2016 percentage crossed the 70% mark for the first time. Democrats crossed the 70% mark in 2020 and No Party voters were close at 68.64%.

Concluding Comments

Although Johnson County is certainly not representative of all Iowa counties, its population size and the fact that it is the home to the University of Iowa make it an interesting case. This is particularly true given the large percentage of registered Democrats in the county and the resulting attention campaigns give to its voters. One aspect of this attention is the focus on absentee voting by parties, campaigns, and even issue-oriented groups. Thus, it is not surprising that voters in Johnson County are more likely to take advantage of absentee voting and that their overall return rates are higher for all three parties than other voters in the state.

The statistics also show some variation between presidential and midterm election years. Although there is a general trend for increased use of absentee voting for both types of elections, the additional attention and resources in presidential elections still seem to affect the extent and manner in which Johnson County voters make use of absentee voting. In addition to such variations we also see some differences in how the voters of each party make use of absentee voting.

There are four final points worth mentioning. First, because No Party voters have a lower return rate for mailed ballots (Figure 7), it seems to be a good thing that they usually have the highest percentage of in-person early voting (Figure 6). In fact, given that voters in the 18-24 age group are more likely to be registered as No Party, and that voters in that age group tend to have lower turnout rates, it would seem appropriate for campaigns to emphasize satellite voting stations rather than mailed absentee ballots for this group.²⁷ This is particularly true given the additional obstacles for going door to door in dorms and apartment buildings to obtain mailed absentee ballot requests.

Second, the emphasis on mailed ballots changes somewhat from one election to the next, even aside from differences in presidential versus midterm elections. Still, as I mentioned before, to the extent a campaign or group emphasizes obtaining mailed

²⁷ See, in particular, Figures 3a and 6a of the fourth paper in the series.

ballot requests one would expect them to follow up with ballot chasers to make sure the voters return the ballots. One problem, however, is that the resources of a campaign can often be redeployed as a campaign progresses. In presidential years, for example, a campaign might reduce efforts in one state in favor of another as it attempts to reach 270 electoral votes. Such a redeployment of resources could reduce the number of ballot chasers needed to make sure remaining ballots are returned. Although the return rate for Johnson County voters is higher than the state as a whole, there are still many mailed ballots that are not returned, particularly for No Party voters.

Third, aside from turnout issues associated with younger and No Party voters, the high turnover rate of young voters in a county dominated by a major university creates additional challenges. Students at the University of Iowa who come from other parts of the state or other states will be unfamiliar with local issues and candidates and are often reluctant to register to vote locally. Even in presidential election years, students may prefer to vote in their home county or state so they can cast ballots for local candidates in other races. Of course, even those who do register to vote locally will likely be gone in just a few years, replaced by a new group of students coming from other locations with different voting traditions.

Finally, despite the additional data available for Johnson County, I was still not able to address the question of whether the emphasis on absentee voting increases turnout or “cannibalizes” turnout for Election Day. In the tenth paper I noted that with turnout steady and population gain minimal in Iowa, the increase in absentee voting suggests more that people are not waiting until Election Day to cast their ballots. If that is the case, could the resources used to get voters to vote early be better used elsewhere? The answer to that question will depend on the particular situation for a specific campaign and election, but on the whole I think it is still worth the effort. At the very least, having votes in the bank allows campaigns to more efficiently direct their efforts in the final days of a campaign. In addition, such efforts undoubtedly do reach some voters who would otherwise not register or vote for one reason or another.

Figure 1: Iowa Registered Voters by Party in Election Years Since 1982

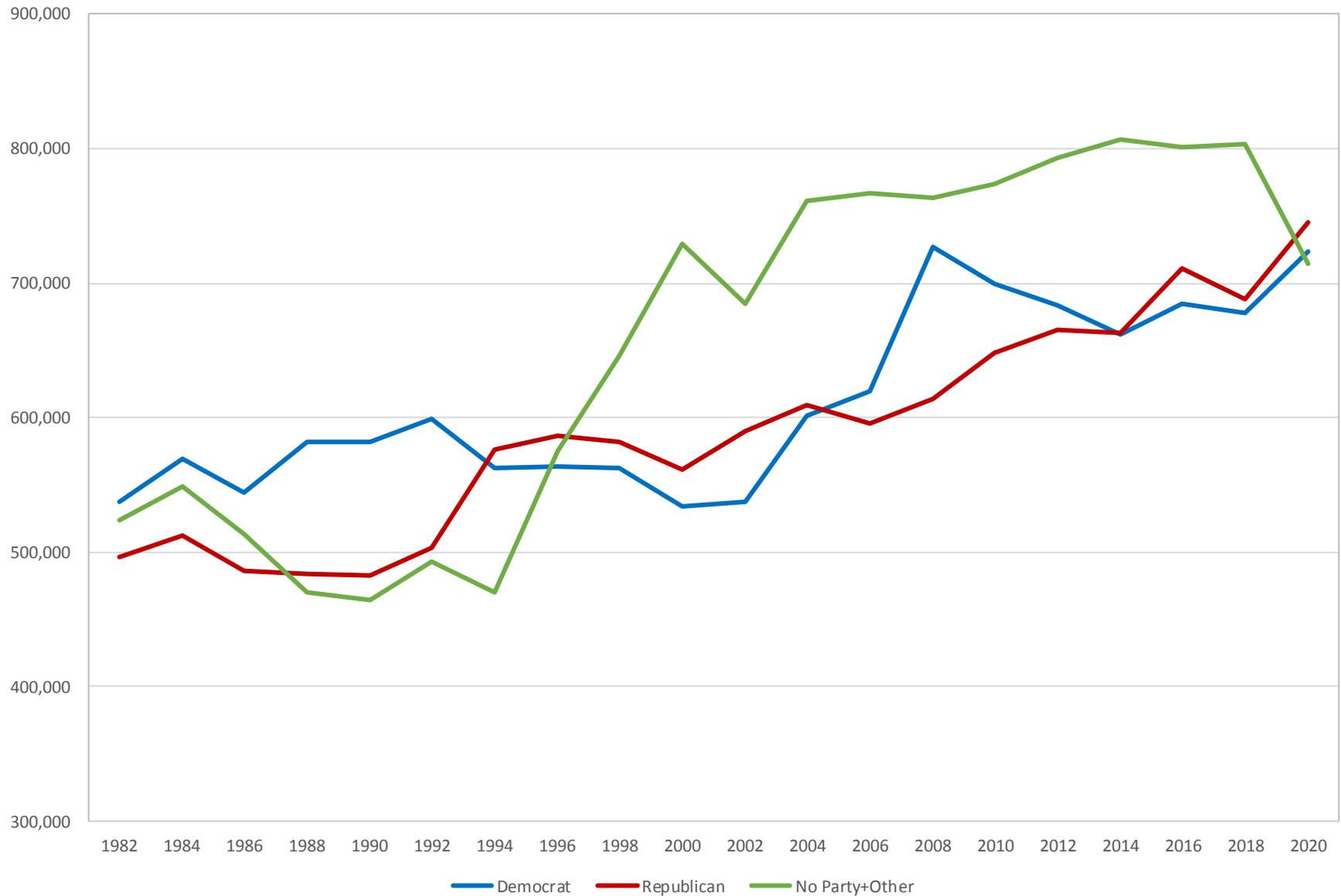


Figure 2: Johnson County Registered Voters by Party in Election Years Since 1992

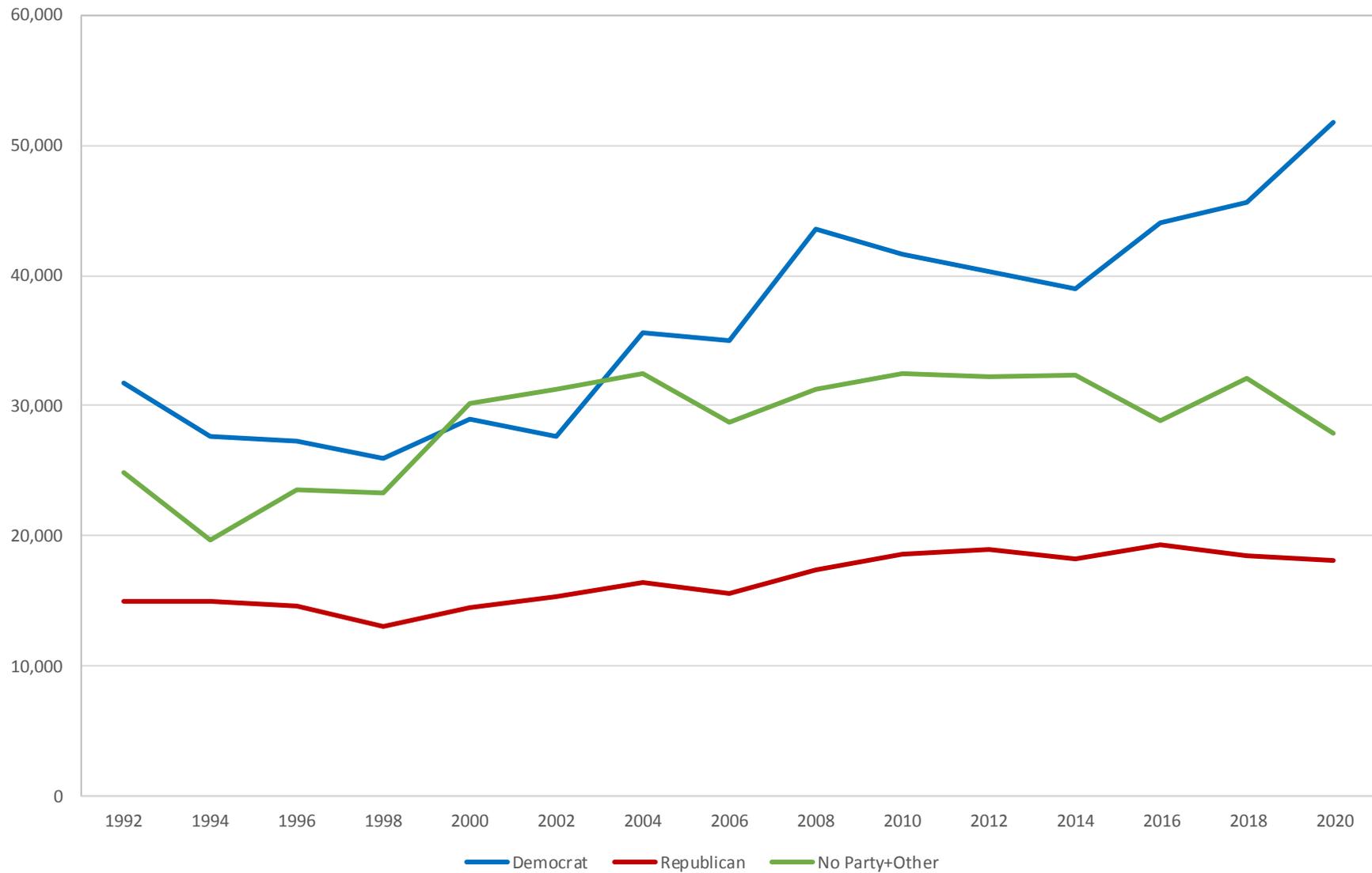


Figure 3: Iowa and Johnson County Absentee Voting Percentages in Election Years Since 1974

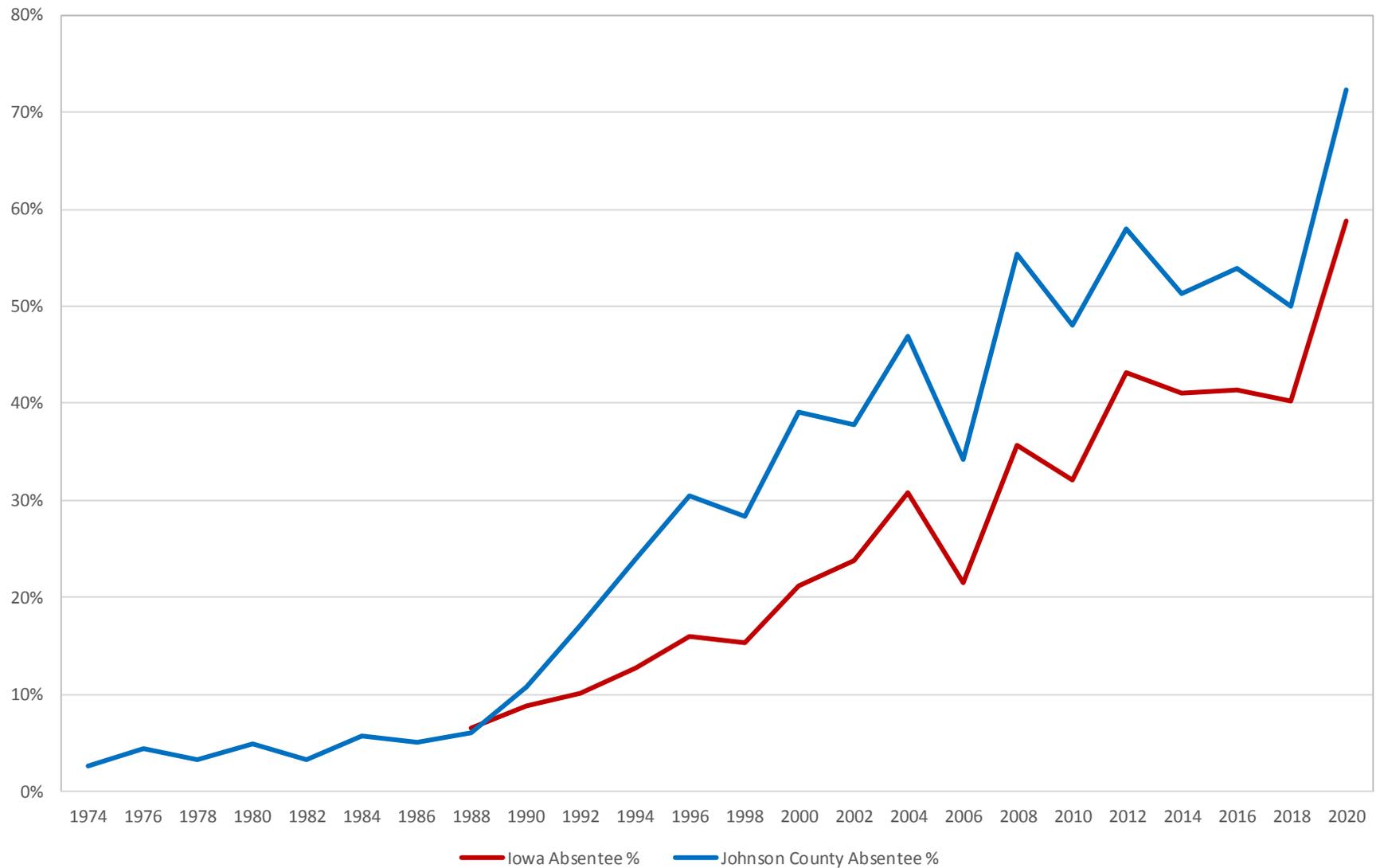


Figure 4: Johnson County Absentee Voting Returned Ballot Percentages Combined and by Party in Election Years Since 1992

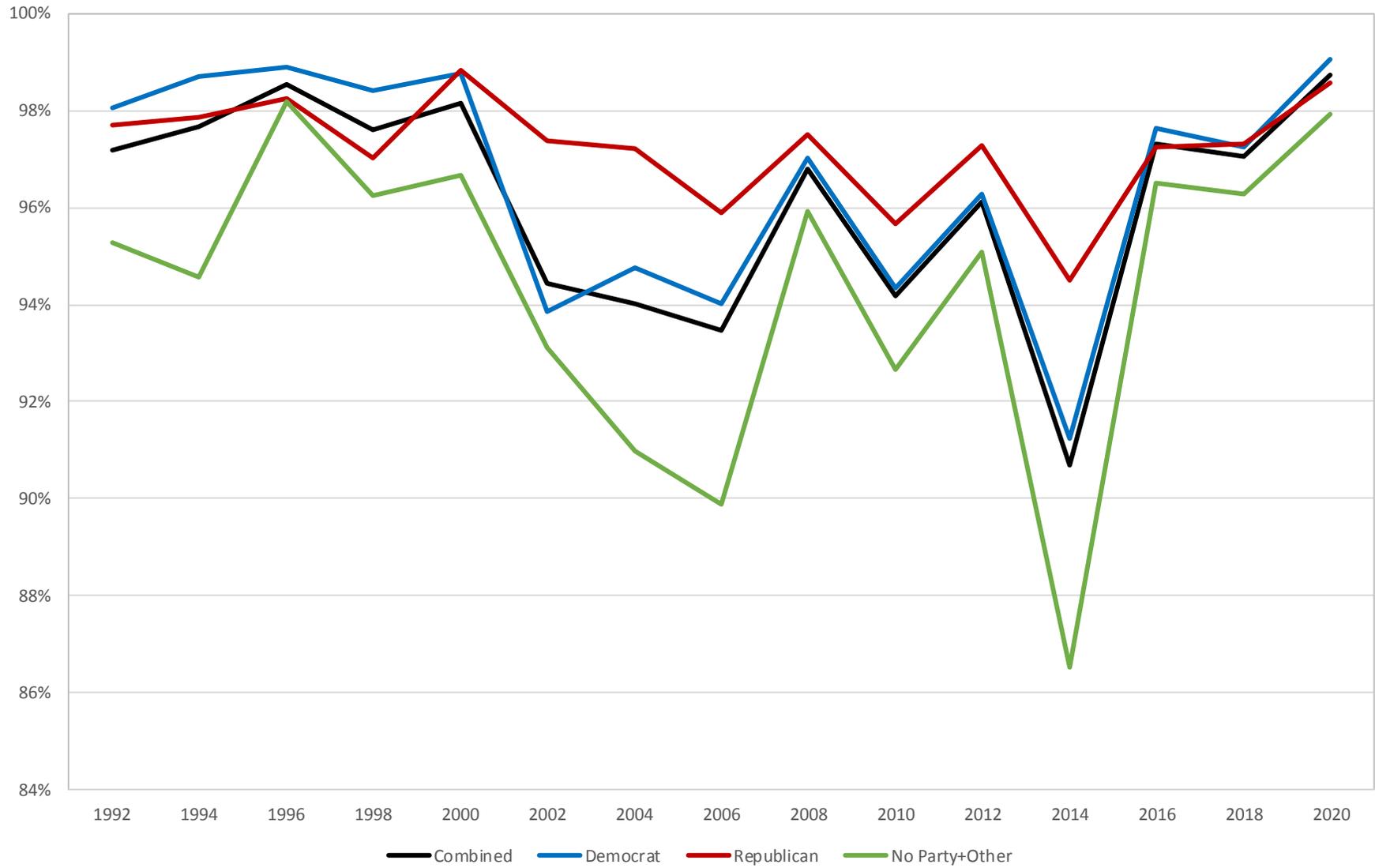


Figure 5: Johnson County Mail and In-Person Early Voting in Election Years Since 1992

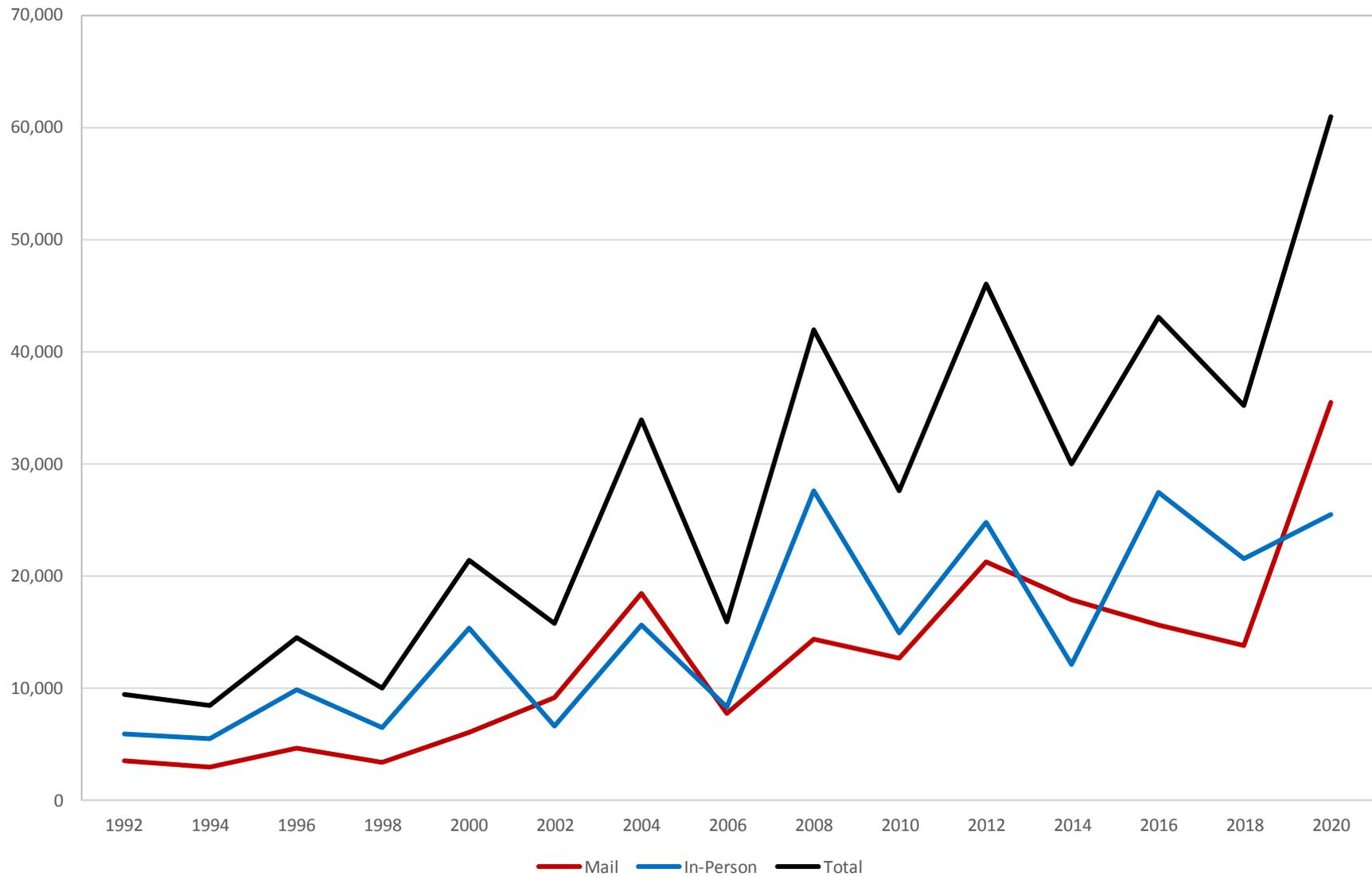


Figure 6: Johnson County In-Person Early Voting Percentage by Party in Election Years Since 1992

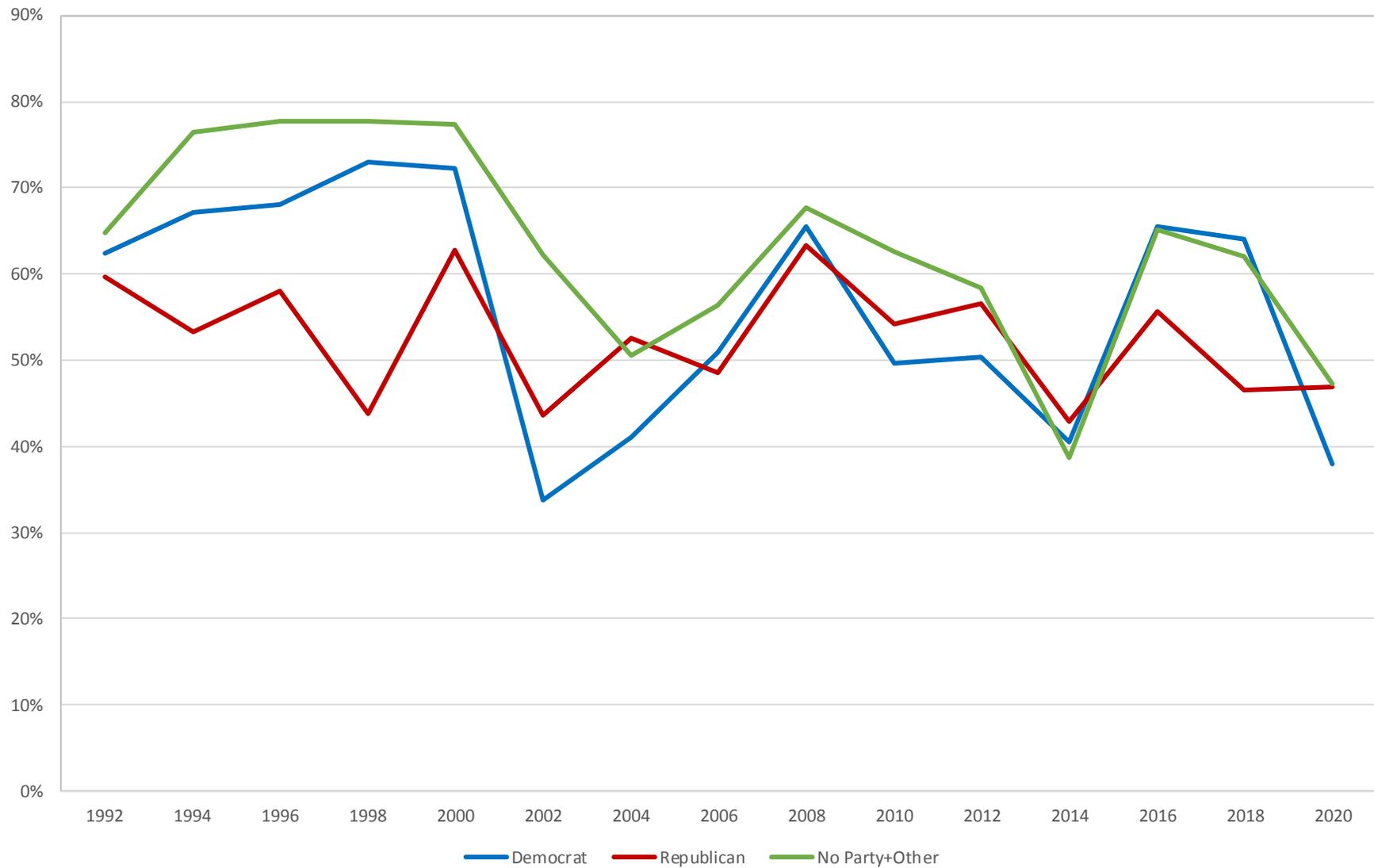


Figure 7: Johnson County Mailed Absentee Ballot Return Percentage by Party in Election Years Since 1992

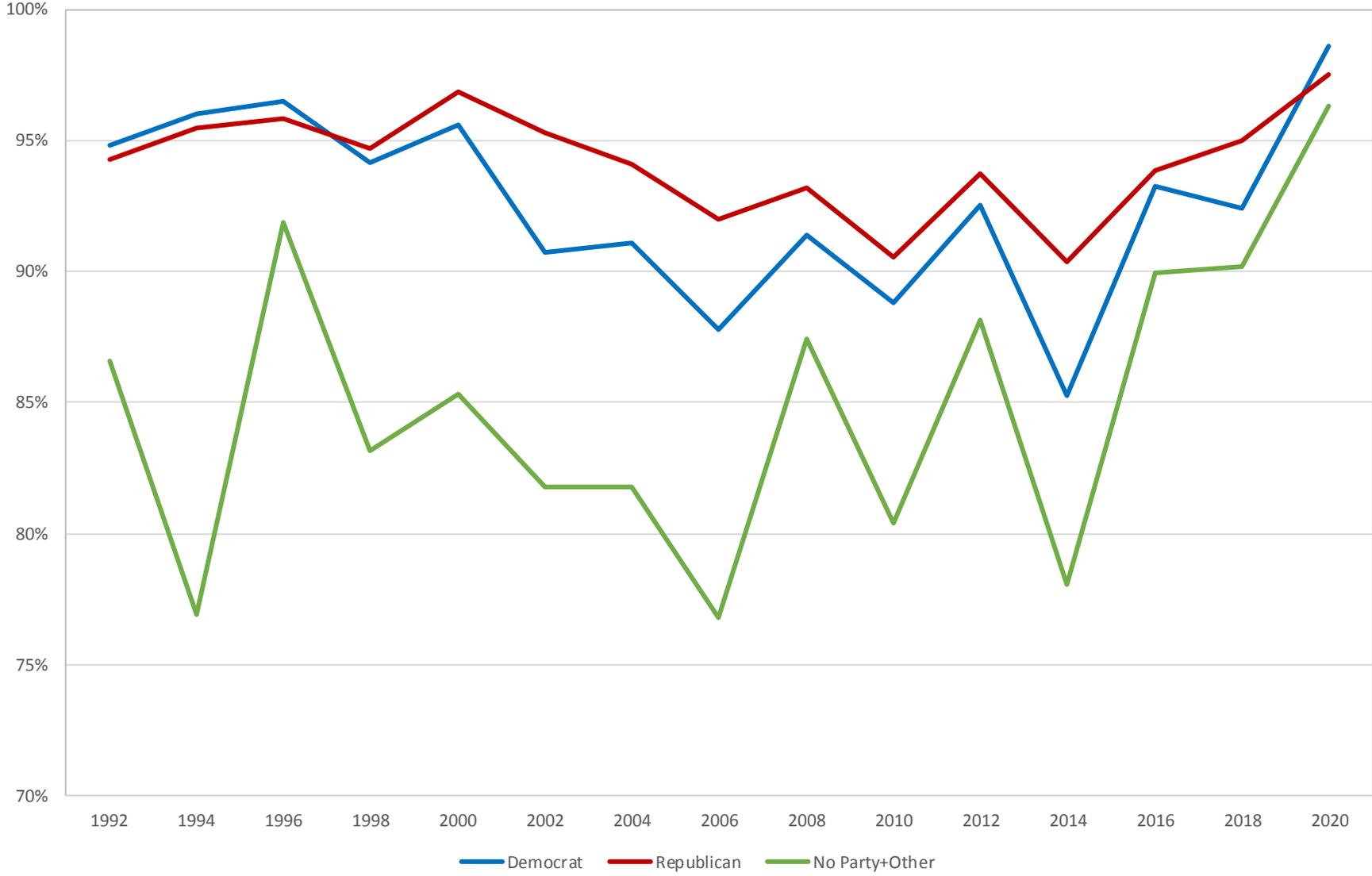


Figure 8: Johnson County In-Person Early Voting Percentage at Auditor's Office by Party in Election Years Since 1992

