

Iowa Voting Series, Paper 3: An Examination of Iowa Turnout Statistics Since 1982 by Party and Sex

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Abstract

This is the third paper in a series examining aspects of voting in Iowa. In this paper I examine Iowa's turnout in presidential and midterm elections since 1982 with a focus on party and sex. Looking first at registration numbers I find that women lead men in voter registrations by an average of about 106,000 during the period. Within political parties (Democrats, Republicans, and No Party voters) there are distinct differences in registration. Republicans have the most even division with women leading at the beginning of the period and then men overtaking them and opening a lead of 32,576 by 2018. Women led No Party voters throughout the period by a fairly consistent margin averaging just under 30,000 voters. This difference was most reflective of the overall registration difference for all Iowa voters on a percentage basis. Women also led men in registered Democrats. The gap for Democrats was large at the start of the period at 40,030 voters and widened to nearly 108,199 by the end of the period. In terms of turnout, the differences between men and women were relatively small. Republican women had the highest turnout percentage for 17 of the 18 general elections during the period. Republican men came in second in all but 1982 (where they led), 1988 and 2008. Women Democrats had a higher turnout percentage than their party's men in presidential elections, but the men had a slightly higher percentage in seven of the 10 midterm elections. No Party voters, men and women, had much lower turnout percentages in both presidential and midterm elections than either Democrats or Republicans. No Party women had a higher turnout percentage in all nine presidential elections while men took the lead in all 10 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 might lead to changes in the text as well. Below is a list of the updates as they occur.

- January 2015: Initial release
- April 2015: Update to include 2014 election data (a few fixes after posting)
- March 2017: addition of 2016 election data; extension of data back to 1982 with significant changes to the text; format changes for some figures
- May 2019: Update to include 2018 election data and related text changes

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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 this paper I dig a bit deeper into the turnout statistics and examine them by both party and sex. 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 the 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 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 seems to indicate that the missing ballots did not affect turnout statistics, only vote totals in the various races. As I write this it is unclear if the Secretary of State will be able to adjust the information in the

is broken out by sex and party as well as by age group. For each subgroup, the number who voted absentee is also indicated.⁵

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, but they do not include an “Other” category as they do for the registration statistics.⁶ 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 1982 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 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 Democrats, Republicans, and No Party voters for this paper.

Iowa Registered Voters

I begin by repeating Figures 1a and 1b from the second paper in the series.⁷ These figures show the number of registered Iowa voters and the turnout percentage in general elections from 1982 to 2016. This period covers nine presidential elections and 10 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 36 years.⁸ Figure 1b shows that the turnout percentage for the elections has been relatively steady, particularly after 1994, though there is a clear difference between presidential and midterm years. The turnout in presidential elections has varied between 71.16%

Statewide Statistical Reports based on the missing ballots, but I will update the data used here if it changes.

⁵ Without getting into the specifics, “absentee” voting in Iowa takes several forms, including traditional mail-in absentee voting plus early voting at satellite stations and at the offices of the county Auditors.

⁶ “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.

⁷ 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.

⁸ See the first paper in the series, which examines Iowa voter registration figures since 2000, for more details (<http://www.profhagle.com/papers/iowa-voting-series>).

(2016) and 86.01% (1992). Although the turnout for midterm elections has also varied within a similar range of about 15 points (a low of 52.71% in 2006 and a high of 67.48% in 1982), that range is substantially below the range for presidential elections. The average turnout in presidential years is 75.49%, 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.

As I mentioned in the previous 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., those who are old enough minus 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.⁹ I am also not considering how Iowa compares with other states in terms of turnout.

Figure 1a showed the overall voter registration numbers for Iowa. In Figure 2 we see the difference in registration numbers between men and women.¹⁰ There are two quick points to make about these registration numbers. The first is that women outnumber men among Iowa's registered voters for the entire period. Second, notice the consistency of the gap. Despite the increase in Iowa's population and registered voters during the period, the gap between registered men and women was fairly steady at an average of just under 106,000. The high came in 2004 when registered women outnumbered men by 117,555. The low occurred in 1982 when the difference was 92,352. On the other hand, and despite the overall consistency, the gap between men and women has been reduced in every election since the high of 2004. For the 2018

⁹ 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 than those not registered. Identifying and registering those who are eligible is an additional process that requires treatment separate from the focus of this paper.

¹⁰ The Iowa Secretary of State turnout statistics also include an "Unknown" category for sex. The number in this category is relatively small, ranging from a high of 222 in 2004 to a low of three in 1988. The figures in this category are not included for the discussion in this paper.

election the difference of 93,920 was the second time the gap was under 100,000 since 1992 and the second smallest of the entire period.

Of course, followers of politics are well aware of the differences between the political parties on various issues related to sex, real or alleged (e.g., “gender gap,” “war on women”). Thus, the next step is to look at voter registration by party and sex. Before doing so, it is worthwhile to provide a bit more background on voter registration by party. In brief, between 1982 and 1994 the number of registered voters for Democrats, Republicans, and No Party voters were fairly even. Between 1994 and 2000 there was a dramatic surge in No Party registrants such that since 1998 No Party voters have outnumbered registrants of either Democrats or Republicans. The gap was fairly consistent between 2000 and 2007, but narrowed significantly in early 2008 so that by mid-2008 active registered Democrats came within about 2,000 of those registered as No Party. Over the next few years No Party registrants remained relatively steady while Democrats lost and Republicans gained. By the start of 2014, Democrats and Republicans had a nearly equal number of registrants and there were roughly 100,000 more No Party registrants than in either party. Many No Party voters change their party registration so they can participate in the Iowa Caucuses. This was true for 2016 when both Democrats and Republicans had open caucuses. As a result, Republicans narrowed the gap with No Party voters to a bit under 33,000 after the Caucuses, but it grew to over 50,000 by early 2017.¹¹

In Figure 3 we see the voter registration numbers for men and women in Iowa’s three main political parties (Democrats, Republicans, and No Party voters) for the 18 general elections beginning with 1982. There are several things worth noting about these numbers.

Let me start by looking at the differences within each party. We can see quite clearly that women always outnumber men for both Democrats and No Party voters. There were also more women Republicans than men registered between 1982 and 2002 elections. Although Republican men became more numerous than Republican women for the 2004 election, the gap was small and remained so for 2006. The difference grew to 9,957 by the 2008 election and continued to expand through 2018 when it was 32,576.

The gap between men and women was the most consistent for those registered as No Party. The average difference was 28,978 with a high of 39,733 (2004) and a low of 21,519 (2018). Unlike the two parties, the difference between the number of men and women registered as No Party rose and fell several times during the period. Beginning with the third smallest difference of 23,185 in 1982, the difference rose to 27,845 in 1988

¹¹ See the prior two papers in this series for more details, particularly Figure 2 in each paper. Figure 2 in the first paper shows monthly registration totals by party. Figure 2 in the second paper shows registration numbers by party for the general elections from 1982 to present.

before falling to the second lowest value in 1992. The difference grew slightly in 1994, but then rose dramatically in 1996 and continued to expand through 2000. For the 2002 election the difference fell slightly, but then rose to the high for the period in 2004. The difference fell over the next three elections to 25,485 for 2010, before rising slightly in 2012 and falling again in 2014, 2016, and 2018. The difference between men and women No Party voters in 2018 was 21,519, which was 1,666 less than the difference at the start of the period in 1982. One explanation for this variability (though within a relatively narrow range) is that No Party voters may be more likely to switch their registration to one of the parties. Because Iowa primaries and caucuses are “closed” (i.e., you must be a registered member of a particular party to participate in a caucus or vote in a primary), No Party voters need to change their registration if they wish to participate in a particular caucus or primary for the Democrats or Republicans. After participating in a caucus some voters will then change their registration back to No Party, but many do not.¹²

The voter registration gap between men and women is largest for the Democrats. It starts with a low for the period of 40,030 in 1982 and grows to 108,199 by 2018. There were four elections when there was a slight reduction in the gap: 1990, 2000, 2010, and 2014. Notice that three of those four reductions occurred in midterm elections. Although the gap between men and women is growing for both Republicans and Democrats, it is growing faster and is much wider for Democrats.

Figure 2 of the second paper in the series showed that there were significant changes in voter registration by party after the 1994 and 1996 elections. Those changes are also shown in Figure 3 when looking at voter registration by both party and sex. From 1982 through 1996, women Democrats were the largest group and the other groups rose and fell below them in a fairly tight cluster. Following the 1994 election the number of No Party voters dramatically increased through 2000 so that beginning in 1998 No Party women were the most numerous group for every election except 2008. In contrast, from 1996 on Democrat men have been the smallest group, again with the exception of 2008. The huge surge in registrations for Democrats in 2008 allowed the women to surpass No Party women and the men to surpass both Republican men and women. The lead was temporary in both cases, however, as the number of women Democrats fell by over 14,000 registrants by 2010 while the number of No Party women rose by about 3,500 to return them to a slight lead. For the Democrat men, after their surge in 2008 they lost about 12,500 registrants by 2010 while Republican men gained about 19,000 registrants and Republican women gained about 14,000.

¹² That is one reason why although No Party voters dominate the 18-24 Age Group, in the 65+ Age Group they are by far the least numerous. See Figures 3a to 3e in the fourth paper in the series for more details (<http://www.profhagle.com/papers/iowa-voting-series/>).

The surge in registrations for Democrats in 2008 was not surprising given the intense interest in the Iowa Caucus race between Hillary Clinton, John Edwards, and Barack Obama. As shown in Figure 2 from the first paper in the series, the caucus surge came largely at the expense of No Party voters. In other words, many No Party voters switched their registration to Democrat to participate in the Democratic caucuses. Following the caucuses Iowa was considered a swing state for the 2008 general election and intense voter registration efforts by both parties allowed No Party voter registration to again surge so that total No Party voters (men plus women) again rose well above that of Democrats, even if Democrat women still maintained a small lead over No Party women on election day 2008.

Figure 4 is divided into three parts. Figures 4a and 4b show the number of registered voters by sex and the number voting. Figure 4c then charts the turnout percentage for each group. The height of the bars represents the total number of registered voters for men (Figure 4a) and women (Figure 4b). The solid portion of the bars in Figures 4a and 4b indicates how many of that number voted.

As seen in Figure 4c, for the most part the turnout percentages of men were very similar to the overall turnout percentages seen in Figure 1. The turnout in presidential elections ranged from a low in 2016 of 69.70% to a high of 85.72% in 1992. Also like overall turnout, the turnout percentages for men in midterm elections were substantially lower, ranging from a low of 52.81% in 2006 to a high of 67.70% in 1982. Despite the lower turnout in midterm years, it was in these elections that the turnout for men was the closest to the overall turnout. In fact, for nine of the 10 midterm elections the turnout percentage for men was slightly higher than the overall percentage.

The turnout percentages for men provide an indication of what to expect in the turnout percentages for women. In Figure 4c we see a similar pattern in that one of the lowest turnout percentages in presidential elections occurred in 2016 and the highest in 1992. For the midterm elections, the highest turnout percentage for women occurred in 1982 (as it did for men). In addition, like men the turnout percentages for women in 2006, 2010, and 2014 were nearly identical.

One interesting point of comparison between men and women is that in presidential elections women's turnout percentages were roughly two to three percentage points higher than men. Conversely, in midterm elections men turned out at a higher percentage than women, but the difference was less than one percent in all 10 years.

Before turning to the final figure it is worth a reminder that one cannot look at turnout without considering overall registration. For example, although the 2004 turnout percentage was the highest for both men and women (and thus overall) of the last six presidential years, the higher number of registered voters in 2008 meant more actually voted even though the percentage was slightly lower than in 2004. As another example,

although the turnout percentage for women was nearly identical in 2006 and 2010, over 35,000 more women voted in 2010 because there were about 67,000 more women registered for the latter election.

Having looked at the turnout differences between men and women in Figures 4a through 4c, the next step is to examine differences within each party. Figure 5 plots the turnout percentage by both party and sex.

Like overall turnout by party (see Figure 3 of the second paper), we see that Republicans had higher turnout percentages than those registered as Democrat or No Party. Republican women had the highest turnout percentage in 18 of the 19 elections. The sole exception was 1982 where Republican men had a slightly higher turnout percentage, 75.89% to 75.55%. Of course, this means that unlike the overall turnout percentages where men had higher percentages than women in nine of the 10 midterms (2018 being the exception), Republican women had higher turnout percentages than Republican men in nine of the 10 midterms (1982 being the exception).

Similar to the overall turnout differences between men and women, the difference between Republican men and women was largest in presidential election years and very similar for midterm elections. Other than the 1982 election in which they had the highest turnout percentage, Republican men had the second highest turnout percentage in all but two elections: the 2008 presidential election when women Democrats surpassed them by about half a percentage point and the 1988 presidential election in which both men and women Democrats had a slightly higher turnout percentage.

As noted in the prior paper, turnout for Democrats generally tracked just below that of Republicans, with the exceptions of the Republican wave years of 1994, 2010, and 2014 where it was several percentage points lower. The turnout difference between Democrat men and women follows a pattern similar to that of Republicans. Democrat women have a higher turnout percentage in presidential elections, but are nearly equal to Democrat men in midterm elections. Unlike Republican women, however, the turnout of Democrat women is below that of Democrat men for all the midterm elections except 2010, 2014, and 2018.

The overall turnout percentage for No Party voters is much lower than those registered to either of the other parties, particularly in midterm elections. As with Republicans and Democrats, women registered as No Party turned out at a higher percentage in presidential elections than No Party men. Interestingly enough, in the presidential elections through 2000 the difference between No Party men and women was less than two percentage points. In the four most recent presidential elections the difference has been at least three and once even over four points.

In midterm elections the turnout of No Party women fell below that of the men in all 10 years. The difference between No Party men and women was very close in all 10 midterms. For eight of the midterms it was less than a percentage point. In the other two it was never greater than one and a half points.

A final point to make regarding Figure 5 is to note that the midterm turnout percentage for Democrats did not recover from the low of 2010 with the next midterm. The 2014 election did not have the same wave feel for Republicans before Election Day as 2010 did and this seems to have been reflected in the slightly lower turnout percentages of Republican men and women. During the 2014 campaign many Democrats, all the way to President Obama, frequently commented on lower turnout for Democrats in midterm elections as a means of encouraging turnout. Despite these efforts, the turnout percentage for Democrat men for 2014 was actually lower than 2010. Women Democrats did have a slightly higher turnout percentage in 2014 than 2010, but the group that gained the most were No Party women, who were up by 1.69%. Democrat turnout did increase in 2018 to its highest midterm level since 1990, but turnout was higher for Republicans and No Party voters as well.

Concluding Comments

According to US Census estimates for 2018, women made up 50.3% of Iowa's roughly 3.2 million citizens.¹³ That results in about 19,000 more women than men. Given that the registration gap between men and women has been fairly consistent at nearly 100,000 or more since at least 1984, it is clear that women register at a higher percentage than men.

Within political parties registration is the most even among Republicans. The gap between men and women registered as No Party is the most reflective of the overall difference in registrations. There is a wide and growing gap among Democrats with the difference between men and women nearly equal to the entire difference across all parties.

Of the six groups (by party and sex), all experienced a net gain in voter registrations during the period. No Party men had the largest gain during the period with 140,885 additional registrants. They were closely followed by No Party women who had 139,219 more. Republican men came in third with 126,880 additional voters. Women Democrats were fourth (104,345), followed by Republican women (65,167). Democrat men gained the least during the period with only 36,176 additional voters.

As a percentage of Iowa voters, the surge in Republican men registrants for the 2016 election gave them the second biggest gain for the period, up 1.61% to 16.61% overall.

¹³ See this Census QuickFacts on Iowa: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/ia,US>.

No Party men and women both gained over a percentage point. No Party men had the largest gain for the entire period, up 1.96% to 18.02%, just behind Democrat women who were at 18.11%. On the other hand, Democrat women lost 0.43%, Republican women fell by 1.76% and Democrat men lost 2.84%. As of 2018 the percentage of voters in the six groups is as follows: No Party women 19.01%, Democrat women 18.11%, No Party men 18.02%, Republican men 16.61%, Republican women 15.11%, and Democrat men 13.13%.

After the significant increase in No Party voters, men and women, following the 1994 election, their gains have leveled off. As I noted in the prior version of this paper, since 2000 No Party voters (men and women) experienced the biggest decline in their percentage of Iowa voters during the period. Even so, they still make up 36.73% of Iowa voters (as of the 2018 election). Despite the slight decline in percentage, as the most numerous party and given that the remaining voters are nearly evenly split between Democrats and Republicans, No Party voters continue to be critical to Iowa election outcomes.

In the second paper we saw that Republicans generally vote at a slightly higher rate than Democrats, but registrants of both parties have a much higher turnout rate than those registered as No Party, particularly for midterm elections. Within each party women tend to turnout at a higher rate than men. This is true for all nine of the presidential elections in this period. It is also in the presidential elections where the difference in the turnout percentage is the greatest between men and women. The turnout difference between men and women is much smaller in midterm elections and this is where we see slight differences among the parties. Republican women had a higher turnout percentage than Republican men in nine of the 10 midterm elections. For Democrats, women only had a very small lead in three of the 10 midterm elections. The midterm difference between men and women is about the same for No Party voters as it was for Republicans, but No Party men had a higher turnout percentage for all 10 elections.

The importance of No Party voters to the outcomes of Iowa elections highlights the importance of get out the vote efforts. This is because No Party voters have the lowest turnout among the three parties as well as the greatest variability between presidential and midterm elections (i.e., the greatest drop in turnout percentage from presidential to midterm elections).

Along these lines, one final point is worth mentioning. In the prior paper I noted the consistency of voting for No Party voters in midterm elections. Even though the No Party turnout percentage is much lower than that of the other parties, and the drop in turnout from presidential election years is larger, it is more consistent in the midterm elections since 1998. For Democrats and Republicans we might expect their turnout to rise or fall depending on whether the base is energized or dispirited, particularly in

midterm elections. Thus, it is not surprising that Republican midterm turnout was a bit down in 2006 (a wave year for Democrats), but up in 2010 (a wave year for Republicans). Although the Democrats' turnout in 2006 was not as high as we might have expected, it was certainly down in 2010 and again in 2014. The consistency of No Party midterm turnout is contrary to this pattern (though it was up in 2018). This is particularly noteworthy given the much closer turnout rates between men and women in midterm elections. Of course, general turnout statistics cannot tell us whether the same people are voting in each of the midterm elections, but the fact that the turnout is more consistent for No Party voters than those of either political party reminds us that for these unaffiliated voters it is not just a matter of how many vote, but who they vote for.

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

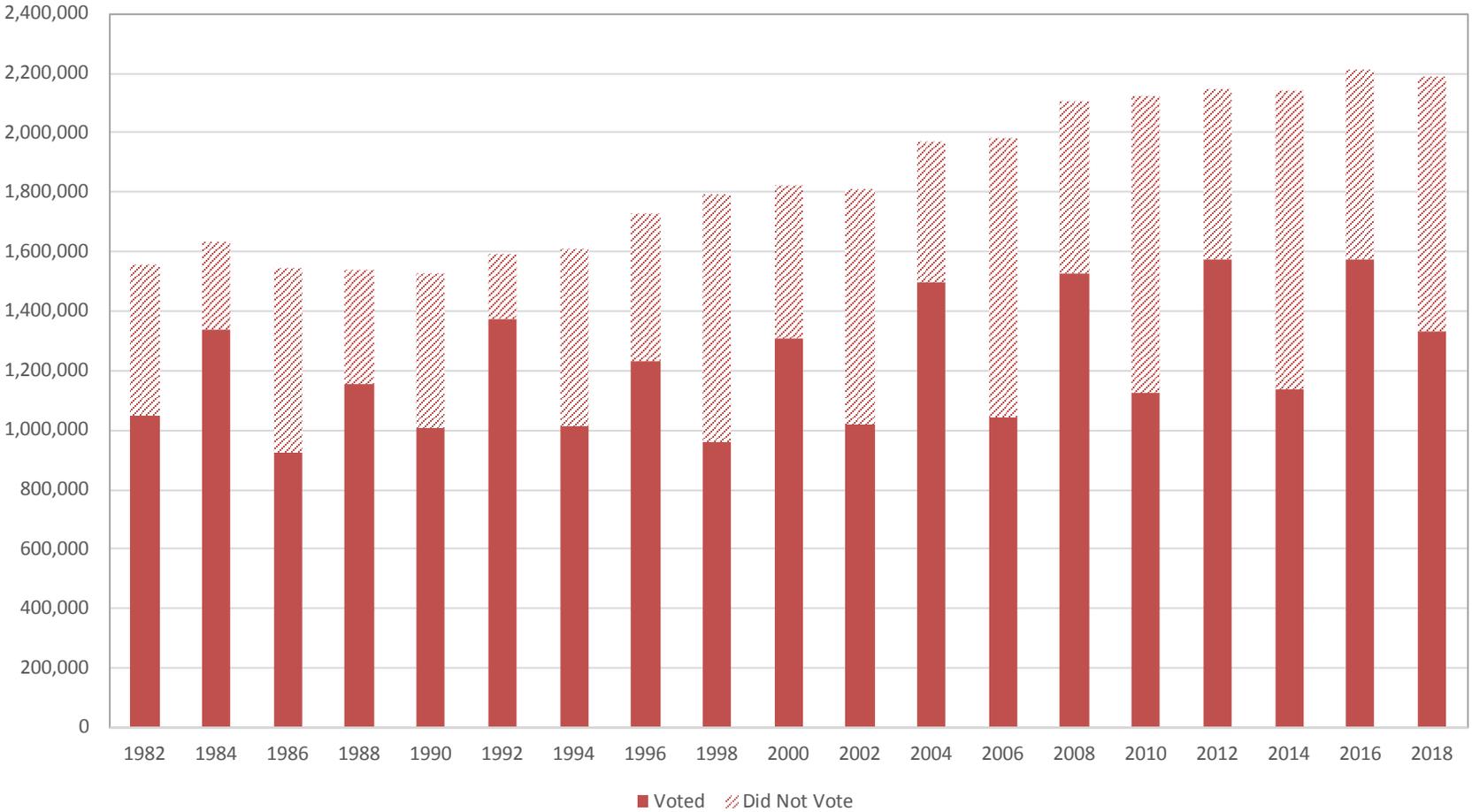


Figure 1b: Turnout Percentage of Iowa Registered Voters in Elections Since 1982

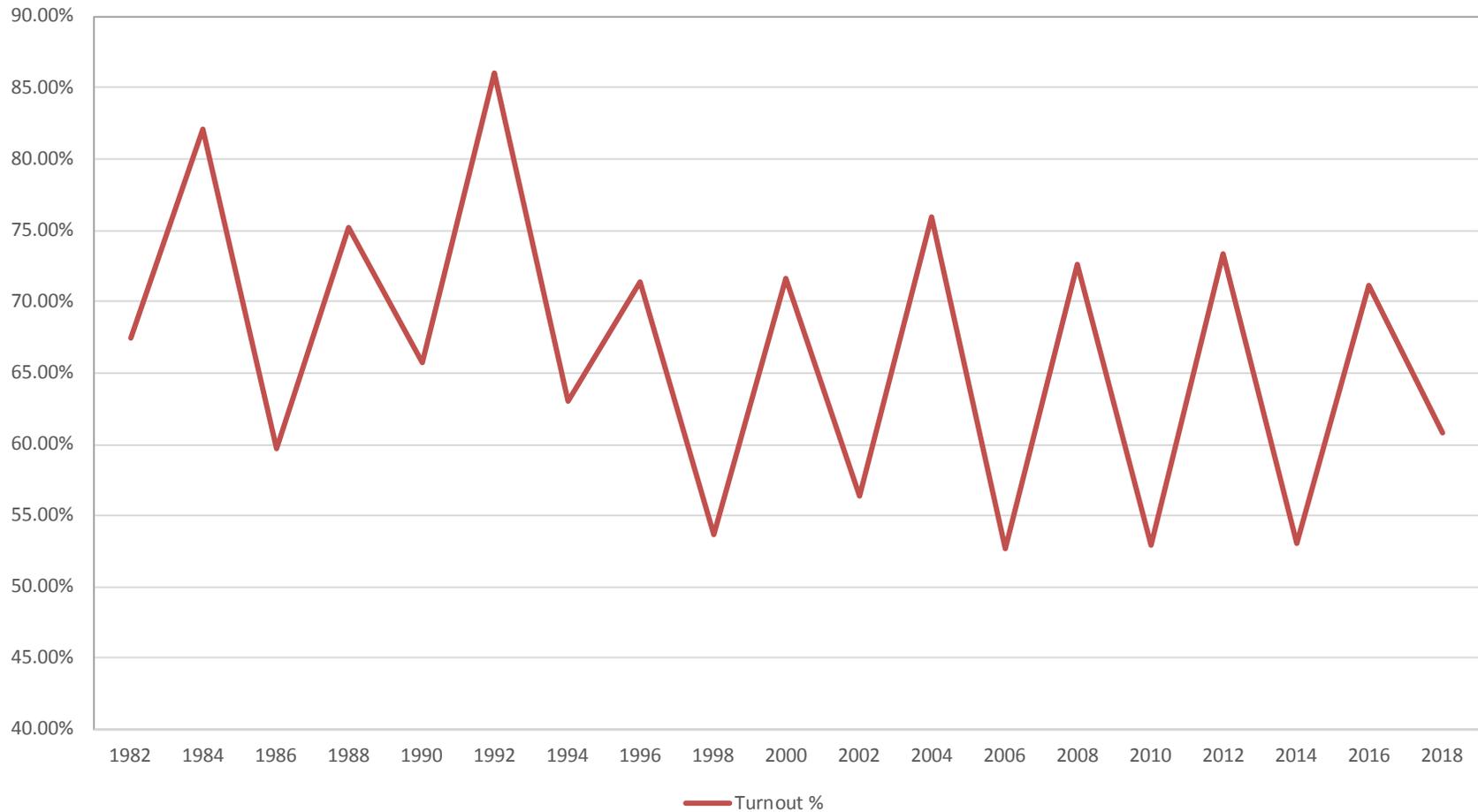


Figure 2: Iowa Registered Voters by Sex in Election Years Since 1982



Figure 3: Iowa Registered Voters by Party and Sex in Election Years Since 1982

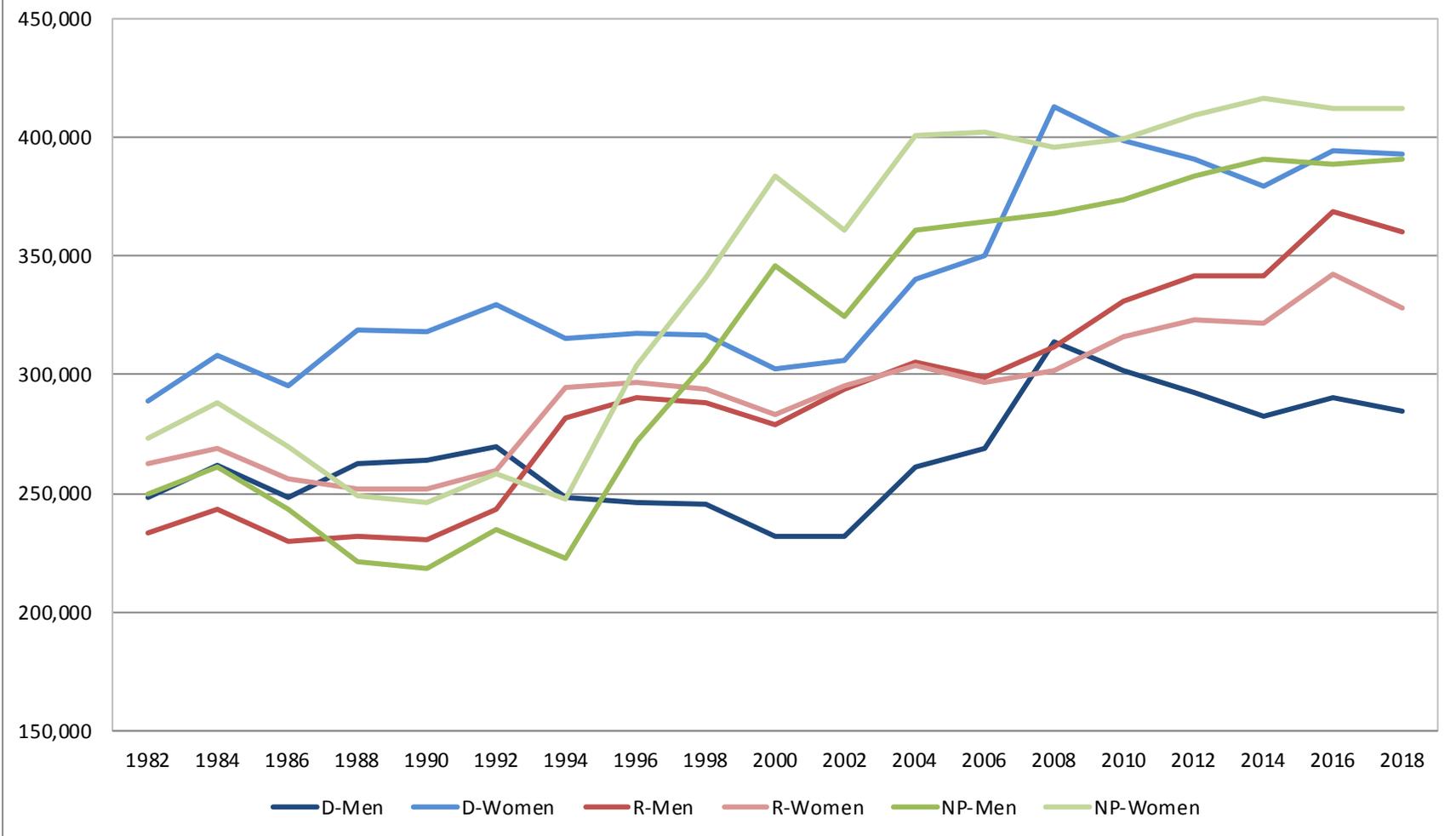


Figure 4a: Iowa Registered Men and Number Voting in Election Years Since 1982

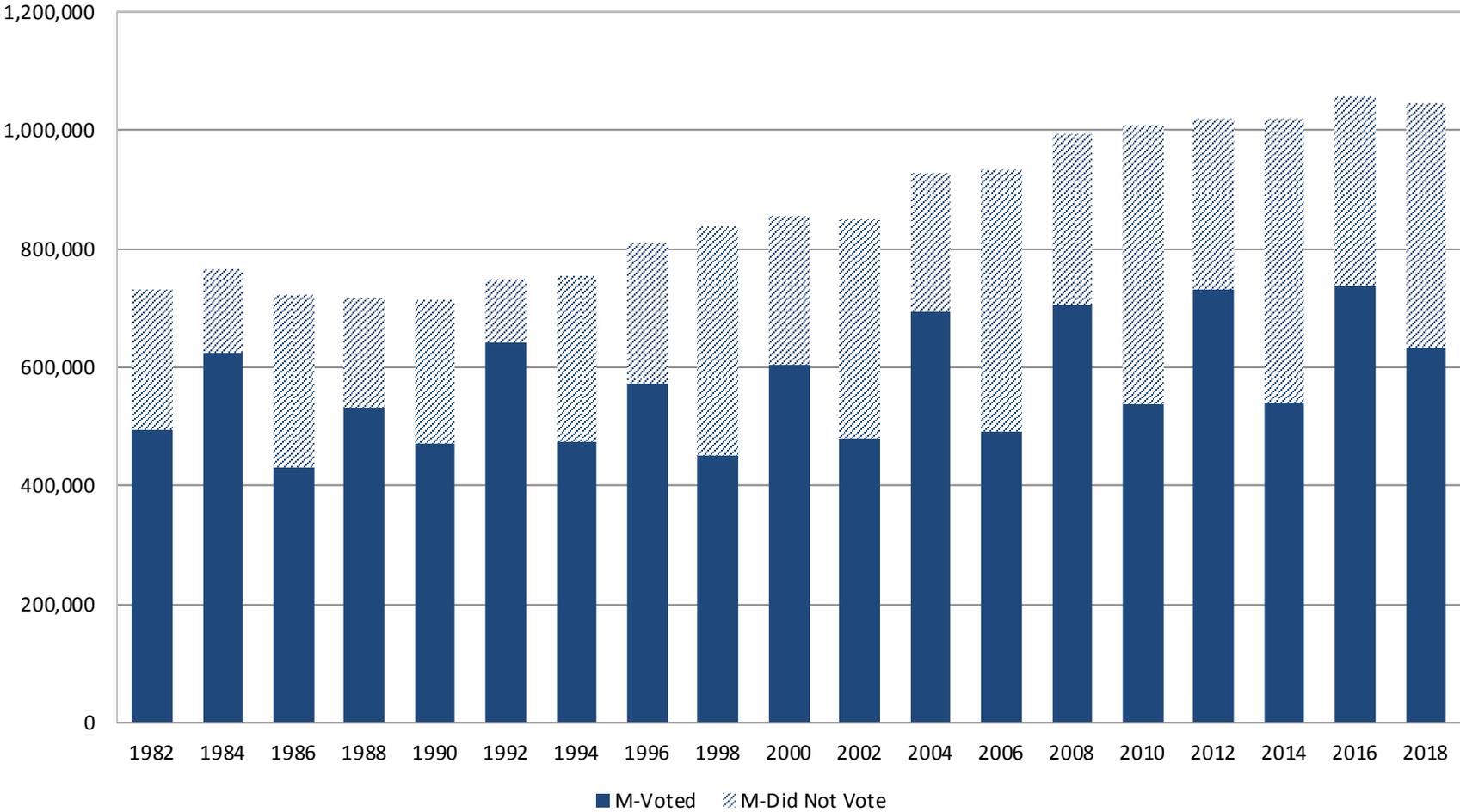


Figure 4b: Iowa Registered Women and Number Voting in Election Years Since 1982

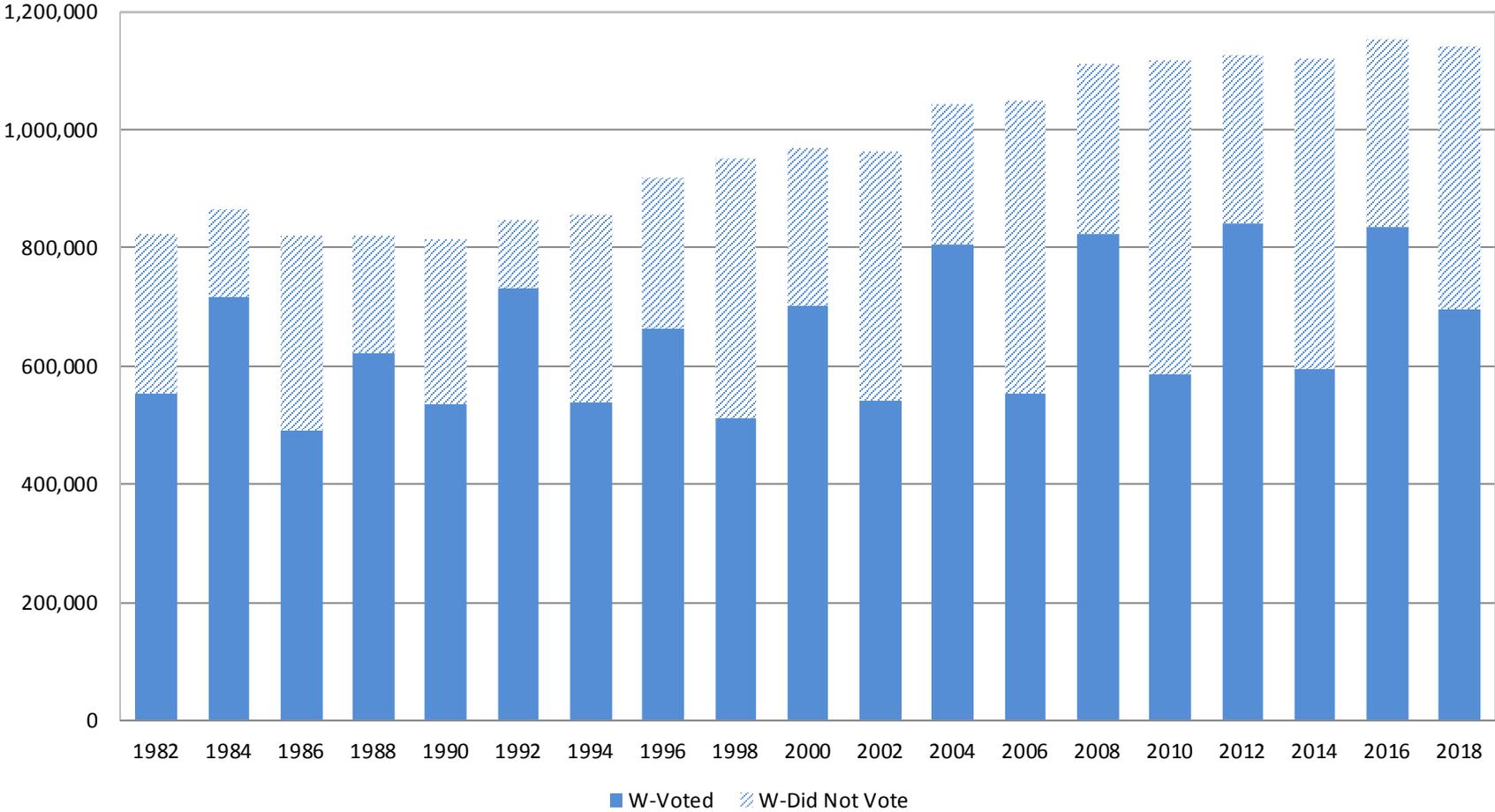


Figure 4c: Iowa Turnout Percentage of Men and Women in Election Years Since 1982

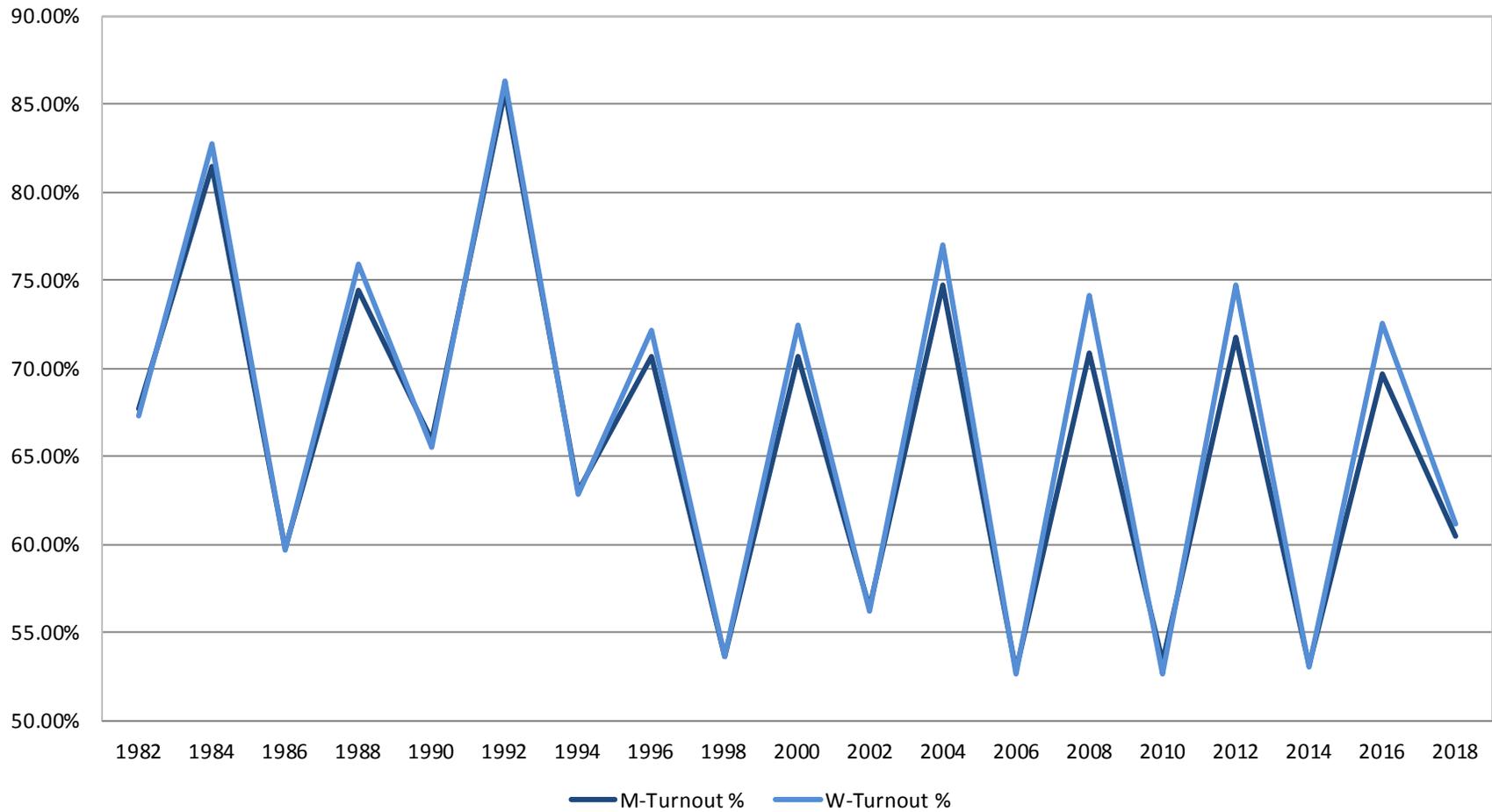


Figure 5: Iowa Voter Turnout Percentage by Party and Sex in Election Years Since 1982

