

Iowa Voting Series, Paper 4: An Examination of Iowa Turnout Statistics Since 1982 by Party and Age Group

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Abstract

This is the fourth 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 age group. Iowa's election statistics are reported for five age groups: 18-24, 25-34, 35-49, 50-64, and 65 & Over. The difference in the age ranges covered by the groups makes direct comparisons difficult, but changes during the period examined are evident as those registered to vote move from one age group to the next. The mix of registered Democrats and Republicans remains relatively stable across age groups during the period. Most striking in terms of voter registration is how No Party registrants go from roughly 50% of those in the youngest age group to only about 20% of those in the oldest group. Looking at election turnout, the data show that there is a clear progression in improved turnout as voters age. In addition, older voters are more reliable, meaning differences in turnout between midterm and presidential elections are less pronounced for older age groups. Turnout differences between Democrats and Republicans are generally small across all age groups, with Republicans nearly always having a slight advantage. Although the turnout percentage of No Party registrants also improves with age, they are always well below Democrats and Republicans.

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Updates

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

- March 2014: Initial release (fixed date after posting)
- May 2015: Update to include 2014 election data
- March 2017: addition of 2016 election data; extension of data back to 1982 with significant changes to the text; format changes for several figures; correction to some figure titles after posting
- May 2019: Update to include 2018 election data and related changes to text
- May 2021: Update to include 2020 election data and related changes to 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 party and gender. In this paper I examine a different aspect of the turnout statistics by focusing on party and age group. 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.

is broken out by gender 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 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 hundred 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 parties 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 2020. This period covers 10 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 maintenance of the voter lists (2002, 2014, and 2018), the number of registered voters in Iowa has slowly increased over the last 38 years.⁸ Figure 1b shows that the turnout percentage for the elections has been relatively

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>). 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 mention in a different context below, this is an example of the difference in resources for get out the vote efforts in midterm (2002) and presidential (2012) election years.

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 in the series 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 was much lower than either Democrats or Republicans, particularly in midterm elections.

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.⁹ I am also not considering how Iowa compares to other states in terms of turnout.

Iowa Registered Voters by Age Group

Figure 1a showed the overall voter registration numbers for Iowa. Figure 2 breaks out those numbers by age group as of the 20 election days included in the period. The age groups used in reporting the statistics are 18-24, 25-34, 35-49, 50-64, and 65 & Over. Two points need to be made about these groups before proceeding. First, quite obviously the range covered by each age group is not the same. The youngest group only covers seven years. The next group covers 10 years, the next two cover 15 years each. The final group covers the largest range, but has no set length. This means that direct comparisons between age groups, at least in terms of raw numbers, are not appropriate. For example, for the 2000 election there were 221,021 registrants in the 18-

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 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.

24 group, but more than twice that number in the 35-49 group. Given that the range of ages included in the 35-49 group is over twice that of the 18-24 group the much larger number of registrants in the older group is not particularly surprising.

A second factor to consider is the “generational” or time aspect of the data. For example, over the 38 years examined here every person registered in the 18-24 group for the 1982 election had moved to the 50-64 group by 2014.¹⁰ This gradual movement is something to be considered when examining the data. As an example, for the 2000 election those in the 35-49 group had 145,952 more registrants than the 50-64 group. By 2014, however, the older group had surpassed the younger by 76,533 registrants. Of course, during this 14-year period nearly everyone in the 35-49 group in 2000 had moved to the 50-64 group. Plus, nearly all of those in the 35-49 group in 2014 had been in one of the two youngest groups in 2000.

Focusing more specifically on the data portrayed in Figure 2, it is no surprise that the 18-24 group had the fewest registrants of the five groups for all 20 elections. Aside from the fact that this group covers the smallest age range, younger voters are also the least politically engaged on average. Several factors account for the lesser political engagement of young citizens. A detailed explanation of those factors is beyond the scope of this paper, but those just reaching adulthood will have less political experience to draw on and are likely still in the process of formulating their political views. Thus, it often takes more work on the part of campaigns and parties to get those in the youngest age group to register and vote.¹¹

One interesting aspect of the registration numbers for the 18-24 group is how they rise and fall based on whether the election was presidential or midterm. This is somewhat evident for the 1984 and 1992 elections, but becomes particularly clear after the 2000 election. For the 2000 election the 18-24 group had 221,021 registrants. That number increased slightly to 221,763 for 2002. A more substantial increase occurred for the 2004 presidential election, then we see how the number decreased for 2006, surged to its highest level in 2008, decreased again in 2010, and increased again in 2012, decreased in 2014, increased once more for 2016, decreased again for 2018, and rose slightly for 2020. Although in prior papers we have seen this type of cyclical pattern for turnout it might seem a little odd for registration numbers. The basic explanation for turnout differences is the additional emphasis during presidential elections that campaigns and parties place on reaching out to those young citizens who have just reached voting age. Democrats are well-known for this emphasis on young voters, but Republicans

¹⁰ Obviously some people move away, die, or lose their voting rights, and some people move to the state or register to vote later in life, but the point is that there is a regular change to the composition of the age groups over time.

¹¹ Campus groups do a lot of this work at colleges and universities. In addition, Iowa Secretary of State Paul Pate instituted a program to register Iowa high school seniors, the Carrie Chapman Catt Award. See details here: <https://sos.iowa.gov/youth/carriechapmancattaward.html>.

recognize their importance too. This is particularly true on college campuses where there are usually student groups associated with each major party that help to register their fellow students.¹²

The existence of student political groups, however, does not explain the rise and fall of registration numbers in the 18-24 group. Rather, the explanation lies in the resources and coordination available in presidential campaigns. It is certainly true that the greater resources available during presidential election years affects turnout, but registration is affected as well. Campaigns and parties want to find supporters among those not registered and the youngest age group likely has the highest percentage of such potential voters. Thus, substantial resources are expended on registering those who have recently become eligible. The greater media attention during a presidential campaign also encourages potential voters to register in ways that a midterm election campaign does not.

The cyclical registration pattern between presidential and midterm elections was not present in the 25-34 age group. After gaining registrants for the 1984 election, the number for this group dropped by nearly 70,000 for 1988. The number then hovered below 300,000 registrants through 2002. A steady increase over the next few elections brought the number to 388,149 registrants for 2010. The number increased more slowly over the next three elections to reach 398,692 for 2016 before dropping off slightly for 2018 and 2020.

The registration numbers for the 25-34 group are reliably above those of the 18-24 group. Again, this is not surprising given the three additional years included in the range. What is somewhat surprising, however, is that the number registered does not always exceed what we would expect given the larger range. More specifically, a rough cut at what we might expect for registration numbers for the 25-34 group would be $10/7$ of the 18-24 numbers. That fraction just divides the 18-24 group's registration numbers by the number of years in that range then multiplies it by the number in the 25-34 range. Thus, for example, given the 205,147 registrants in the 18-24 group for 1982 we might expect at least 293,067 registrants in the 25-34 group. In fact, there were 338,159 registrants in the 25-34 group for 1982. The higher number of registrants than we might expect from this simple calculation can likely be attributed to the additional opportunities for those who did not register while in the younger age group to do so in their later years.

Using this calculation for the remaining years in the period we find that the 25-34 group stayed above the expected registrations through 1996. From 1998 through 2008 the number fell below the expectation. In 2010 the number of registrants in the 25-34 group

¹² For example, here at the University of Iowa in addition to the University Democrats and the College Republicans there is a very active Young Americans for Liberty student group.

finally surpassed the basic expectation by about 33,000. Since 2010 the number of registrants in the 25-34 group has remained fairly steady, so the cyclic nature of the registration in the 18-24 group comes into play in terms of how many more registrants there are in the 25-34 group, but the older group remained above the simple expectation based on the number of years covered by the age group.

There are, of course, several reasons why we cannot place too much emphasis on such a simple calculation for the expected number of registrants in the 25-34 group. For example, and as previously noted, campaigns and parties emphasize registration on college campuses, but upon graduation many college graduates leave the state. This includes both those originally from out of state who came to Iowa for college and then leave afterward as well as Iowans leaving to seek job opportunities elsewhere. Of course, there are some in the 25-34 group who move to Iowa, but (without looking at detailed survey or census data) it seems there is a net population loss between the two groups.

A second reason why registrants may not be as high as expected in the 25-34 group is that under Iowa law a person who does not vote in two consecutive general elections will be placed on “inactive” status and may eventually be removed from the voter rolls.¹³ This is another instance where the emphasis on college students comes into play. As much as a particular campaign or candidate can spark the interest of such students, there may be a lessening of interest in later elections, particularly after the student graduates or leaves college to begin a career, family, etc.

On the other hand, voter registration efforts of the campaigns and parties do not stop at the edge of the college campus. Active grassroots organizations regularly work to register new voters at a variety of locations, events, and gatherings. Thus, those who managed to not register to vote while in the 18-24 group certainly have opportunities do so while in the 25-34 group.

Moving to the 35-49 group we see that it was the largest of the five groups from the beginning of the period until 2010 when the 50-64 group passed it. Although the gap between the 35-49 group and the 25-34 group was small at the start of the period, the gap widened through the 1990s until the number in the 35-49 group started to fall in the 2000s while the number in the 25-34 group started to gain. After falling below 500,000 registrants for the 2012 and 2014 elections, the 35-49 group recovered slightly in 2016 to once again cross the half million mark. For 2018 this group again lost registrants and in addition to falling below the half million mark again, it also dropped below the number of registrants for the 65 & Over group.

¹³ There is a bit more to the process, but that is the gist of it. I discuss this process in a bit more detail in the first paper in this series.

Because the 50-64 group covers the same number of years as the 35-49 group a more direct comparison is possible. At the start of the period the 50-64 group was only the third largest. After beginning the period with 333,752 registrants, the number in this group dropped to just below 305,000 for both 1988 and 1990. After gaining slightly in the next two elections the group experienced a sharp increase in the late 1990s and overtook the 65 & Over group in 2000 and then the 35-49 group in 2010.

Generational change likely accounts for most of this reversal between the 35-49 and 50-64 groups. The younger group experienced sharp gains beginning in 1990. As the gains for the younger group started to level off in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the gains for the older group began to increase. That would have been about the same time that most of those in the younger group in 1990 had moved up to the older group.

The indefinite range of the 65 & Over group does not allow for direct comparisons with the other groups. This group did, however, show steady gains during the period. There were very slight reductions in the number of registrants in this group for 1990, 2000, 2002, and 2006, but gains for the other elections. Of particular interest is that this was the only age group to gain registrants for the 2018 election. In doing so, it passed the number of registrants in the 35-39 group to become the second most numerous group behind the 50-64 group. For 2020, additional gains for the 65 & Over group combined with losses by the 50-64 group put the oldest group only 1,997 from the top spot.

Considering all five age groups, the two youngest groups gained the least during the period. The net gain for the 18-24 group was 53,900 and for the 25-34 group was 34,955. In contrast, the other three age groups each gained over 100,000 registrants during the period, with the 65 & Over group gaining the most at 227,087. Given the progression from one group to the next over time, this seems to speak to Iowa's slow growth and general aging of the population.

Iowa Registered Voters by Age Group and Party

The next step is to examine the party affiliation for each age group. Figure 3 is divided into five parts, one for each of the five age groups.

Figure 3a shows the party (Democrat, Republican, and No Party) distribution of registered voters in the 18-24 group. The first thing one notices in this figure is how many more are registered as No Party than either Democrat or Republican. In fact, except for the period between 1988 and 1994 and the election of 2008, No Party registrants made up nearly 50% or more of those in this age group. By way of comparison with all age groups combined, Figure 2 in the second paper showed that No Party voters were the least numerous category near the start of the period. After the sharp increase in No Party registrants in the mid to late 1990s, they reached a high of

39.96% of registered voters in 2000, but averaged 37.36% in the nine elections since then (2002 through 2018).

In looking at election to election changes, we see that both Democrats and Republicans had minimal changes from 1982 through 2002. Both parties had a small increase in 1984 then lost voters for 1986. Democrats then gained a bit more steadily through 1992, but lost those gains in the elections through 2002. It was no surprise that all three parties gained registrants for the 2004 presidential year. In 2006 both Democrats and Republicans lost about 7,000 registrants, but No Party registrants lost almost 20,000. The 2008 election saw registrations of Democrats surge, in large part due to the hotly contested 2008 caucuses. Republican registrations also rose, but only to just below what the 2004 figure had been. Interestingly, No Party registrations actually decreased in 2008. Again, this was due in part to the 2008 caucuses where many No Party voters apparently switched their registration to Democrat to participate in the Democratic caucuses. Although all three parties lost registrants for 2010, the drop was largest for Democrats at a bit over 16%. For 2012 both Republicans and No Party voters gained back all they had lost for 2010 and more. Democrats, however, actually lost a few hundred registrants. As in 2010, all three parties lost registrants in 2014 and once again Democrats had the largest loss at a bit over 21%. In 2014 Republican registrants in this age group surpassed Democrats by about 600 voters. That lead was extended to 1,434 voters in 2016. In 2018, although both Democrats and Republicans lost registrants (as did No Party voters), Republicans lost more and Democrats regained the lead over them. For 2020, both Democrats and Republicans gained from the reduction in No Party voters, but Democrats gained more.

Young voters were, of course, an important group for Democrats in 2008, and were highly targeted during the campaign. It was clear early in the 2012 cycle that the youngest voters, many of whom were now voting for the first time, were not as energized for Obama as had been the case in 2008. The Obama campaign worked hard to compensate for this loss of enthusiasm, but the loss of registrants for Democrats was a clear indication that the energy level of 2008 was not there for 2012. Although Republican registrants in this age group lost more from 2012 to 2014 than had been the case from 2008 to 2010, the 2014 registrations were the highest for the nine midterm elections up to that point and those losses were regained for the 2016 election which became the high point for them up to that point. The gains for 2020 provided Republicans with their largest number of registrations for the entire period and the second largest number for Democrats.

The final point to make about the 18-24 group is the near parity between Democrats and Republicans. Although this parity exists for all the age groups taken as a whole, the conventional wisdom is that younger voters are more liberal. It is true, of course, that many No Party voters may be casting ballots for Democrats, but at least in terms of voter registration the two political parties are relatively equal in this age group.

Democrats start out the period with an advantage of about 5,000 registered voters. They build on that lead through 1992, but Republicans surpass them in 1996. The Republican lead grows to a little over 6,000 voters by 2002, but a surge of Democrat registrations in 2004 and again in 2008 gives Democrats an advantage of over 23,000 voters. Over the next six years the number of Democrats declines – even in the presidential year of 2012 – and Republicans once again take a small lead in the next two elections before losing it again in 2018.

Figure 3b shows the party registration for the 25-34 group. In many ways the patterns here are quite similar to those of the 18-24 group. No Party voters did not dominate at the start of the period as they did for the 18-24 group, but the late-1990s surge in registrations for them along with losses for the Democrats and Republicans meant that they had more registrants than the combined total for Democrats and Republicans until the Democrats' caucus surge of 2008.

The pattern between Democrats and Republicans is also similar to the younger group. Democrats held the registration advantage at the start of the period, though by a larger margin than was the case for the 18-24 group. Nevertheless, Republicans made up the difference in the mid to late 1990s and held the lead through 2004. Democrats retook the lead for 2008 and unlike the younger group have not seen the same decline in registrants over the last five elections. That kept Republicans from regaining the lead in the last few elections despite their overall gains since 2006.

In terms of the party patterns, Republicans were the most consistent. Republicans had slight gains and losses over the period, but ended the period with more registrants than at the beginning and their second highest number of registrants at 96,885. The gains and losses for Democrats were more substantial than for Republicans, though less than those for No Party voters. The high point for Democrats came in 1984 when they had 116,162 registrants. The losses from then through 2002 were not made up by the surge in 2008 and Democrats actually ended the period with about 2,000 fewer registrants than at the beginning. The pattern for No Party voters is the most volatile. The loss of registrants in the late 1980s and gains in the late 1990s were much steeper than those of either Democrats or Republicans. The variations from midterm to presidential elections are more visible for No Party voters, but between 1994 and 2014 there were near steady increases for them. There were slight losses of No Party voters in the 2016 and 2018 elections. Although all three parties lost registrants for 2018, as with the 18-24 group, the No Party voters in the 25-34 group lost the fewest. Like the 18-24 group, the loss of No Party voters in 2020 corresponded to gains by Democrats and Republicans.

Figure 3c shows the party registration for the 35-49 group. The pattern here is unlike that of the prior two groups for the first dozen years of the period. For this age group No Party voters are not the most numerous at the start of the period. They are behind Democrats and remain so until the surge after 1994. During the same 12 year period

Republicans are further behind both Democrats and No Party voters than for the two younger groups. The three parties converge in 1994 and then separate into a pattern similar to the younger groups with No Party voters taking a significant lead. Republicans in this age group became more numerous than Democrats in 1996 and held that lead through 2020 with the lone exception of 2008.

From Figure 2 we saw that the 35-49 group was the only one of the five to have lost registrants since the mid-1990s. We can see this loss reflected in Figure 3c where all three parties finished the period below their highs. For Democrats the high came in 1992 when they had 178,047 registrants, but in 2020 they had dropped to 147,042. The Republican high came in 1996 when they had 169,771 registrants, but they dropped to 153,334 by 2020. No Party voters lost the most when they went from a high of 230,195 in 2000 to 193,456 in 2020. Since the Democrats' surge in 2008, both Democrats and Republicans in this age group have lost registrants, but the number of No Party voters remained relatively stable until 2020. In fact, for 2018 No Party voters in this age group actually gained registrants, unlike either Democrats or Republicans. Of course, once again the changes for 2020 affect the pattern. Losses by Democrats and Republicans in prior years were mitigated by the increase in registrants who switched from No Party. The loss of No Party registrants in 2020 dropped their numbers below 200,000 for the first time since 1996.

Contrary to the overall pattern for the 35-49 group, Figure 3d shows that the 50-64 group grew throughout the period and did so for all three parties. This is also the first group for which the No Party registrants were not the most numerous at any point during the period. In fact, there were fewer No Party registrants than either Democrats or Republicans for every election in the period except 2018 when they passed Democrats by only 969 voters. The period begins with a bit of separation between the parties. Democrats led Republicans by about 10,000 registrants at the start of the period. The gap widens to about 26,000 when Republicans lost registrants over the next three elections. Republicans closed the gap for the 1994 election and the two parties were nearly equal through 2002 though both gained registrants. No Party voters were well behind Republicans at the start of the period and remained so until the 1994 surge. For the 2000 election the three parties were clustered within 7,000 of each other. Except for the Democrats' surge leading up to 2008, the three parties remained relatively close for the rest of the period. As with the two youngest groups, we again see that all three parties lost registrants for the 2018 election, though once again the loss for No Party voters was smaller than for the other two parties. The sharp drop in No Party voters for 2020 was reflected by substantial gains for Republicans, but Democrats gained the fewest of any age group at only 1,288.

In Figure 3e we see some of the changes found in the 50-64 group continued for the 65 & Over group. Here again, the number of No Party voters was well below that of either Democrats or Republicans. Democrats start the period about 35,000 voters behind

Republicans, but essentially catch up by 1988 and the two are fairly equal for the rest of the period. All three parties gained voters during the period. Democrats and Republicans reached their high points in 2020. No Party voters reached their high point in 2018, but dropped back below 100,000 voters in 2020. This means, of course, that unlike prior age groups all three parties gained registrants in 2018. Despite the No Party losses in 2020, this age group actually gained about 25,000 voters for 2020. A frequent comment about Iowa voters in recent elections has been how its electorate is getting older. Figure 3e confirms this at least to the extent that there are more members in this age group now than at the start of the period.

Voter Turnout by Age Group

Figures 4 and 5 should be considered together. Figure 4 is also divided into five parts, one for each age group. The parts are structured much like Figure 1a in that the height of the bars represents the number of registered voters for that age group for each of the elections. The solid portion at the bottom represents the number of registrants who voted. The vertical axis is scaled the same so that the five parts of Figure 4 can be more easily compared. Figure 5 takes the registration and turnout numbers from Figure 4 and plots the turnout percentages as lines for the 20 elections in the period.

Figure 4a shows the overall registrations and turnout out for the 18-24 group. The relatively small height of the bars is no surprise given how we saw in Figure 2 that this age group has the smallest number of registrants. Most striking in these numbers are the exceptionally low turnout percentages as shown in Figure 5. Compared to the overall turnout percentages shown in Figure 1b (which includes those for the 18-24 group) presidential election year turnout for the 18-24 group averages 22.41% below the overall average. In 1988 this group had its lowest presidential year turnout percentage at 30.14%, which was over 45% below the overall that year. As we saw in Figure 1, turnout in midterm election years was well below that of presidential years. This pattern holds for the 18-24 group, but to an even greater extent. The 18-24 group's average midterm turnout percentage was just shy of 32% lower than the overall average. In fact, for eight of the 10 midterm elections (all except 1982 and 2018) it was less than half the overall turnout percentage.

Figure 4b shows registration and turnout numbers for the 25-34 group. The percentages for this group as shown in Figure 5 were higher than those of the 18-24 group for all 20 elections. Even so, the percentages were only marginally higher for four of the last five presidential elections (all but 2004 where turnout was slightly more than 3% higher). The gaps were larger in the midterm elections. This was particularly so for 1990 where the difference was over 33%. After the 1994 election the pattern became more regular for both the 18-24 and 25-34 groups and the midterm differences became smaller.

Despite the higher turnout percentages compared to the 18-24 group, the turnout for the 25-34 group was still well below the overall percentages shown in Figure 1b. For presidential years turnout for the 25-34 group was 13.03% below the overall average. For the 10 midterm elections the percentage was 18.42% lower. Although when looked at this way it might seem encouraging that the additional drop for midterms was only 5.57%, we must remember that the 25-34 group was starting from a much lower turnout number for presidential years. On the other hand, the average turnout percentage for the 25-34 group for midterm elections was 40.13%, which represents a 35.89% drop from the presidential year average of 62.60%. In contrast, the overall average turnout percentage for midterm elections was 58.55%, which was a drop of only 22.44% from presidential years.¹⁴

Figure 4c shows the registration and turnout numbers for the 35-49 group. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the turnout percentages for this group (shown in Figure 5) is how close they were to the overall percentages. The average turnout percentage for the 35-49 group was 68.70% while the overall turnout percentage was 67.09%. Of the 20 elections, the difference was greater than 5% in only the 1982 election where the difference was 5.37%. The turnout percentages for the 35-49 group are also interesting in that they were all well above those for the 25-34 group. The turnout percentages for the 35-49 group were less than either of the two older groups in 19 of the 20 elections (1992 being the exception), but there was less separation between the 35-49 group and the older two groups than with the two younger groups.

Figure 4d shows the registration and turnout numbers for the 50-64 group. Recall from Figure 2 how the number of registrants in this group grew during the period. This is reflected in the increasing height of the bars.

The first thing to notice in terms of turnout for the 50-64 group is that the percentages have increased substantially from the 35-49 group (or the overall percentages shown in Figure 1b). For presidential years the average turnout percentage was over 7% higher (85.58% for the 50-64 group versus 77.89% for the 35-49 group). For midterm elections the average increase was even larger at 13.31% (72.82% versus 59.51%).

In terms of patterns for this group, the average drop in the turnout percentage for midterm elections was smaller than the overall average at 12.94% (versus 16.94%). Although the turnout percentages were fairly consistent for each election type, the

¹⁴ I think it would be useful to provide a simple example to illustrate the two ways of looking at these percentages. Suppose some group has an average turnout percentage for presidential years of 50%, but only 25% for midterm elections. One way of looking at these two percentages is to note that the midterm percentage is 25% lower, when considering the total number of those registered as 100%. On the other hand, if you think of the presidential year turnout as the starting point (understandable if you expect that those not voting in presidential elections are not likely to vote in midterm elections) then the reduction is 50%.

highest turnout percentages occurred for 1982 (midterm) and 1992 (presidential). The midterm turnout percentages declined in all but three of the midterms following the high in 1982. The three exceptions were in 1990 when there was an increase following the fairly substantial decrease in 1986, in 2002 when there was a slight increase from the 1998 percentage, and in 2018 which saw a smaller midterm drop across all age groups. There was a bit more variation in the presidential year turnout percentages, but they became a bit more consistent after 1996.

The registration and turnout numbers for the 65 & Over group are shown in Figure 4e. The percentages for this group shown in Figure 5 were fairly consistent with the 50-64 group. For presidential elections the turnout percentages were slightly lower on average than the 50-64 group (85.25% versus 85.58%). That might be expected given the likely increasing infirmity of those in this age group. On the other hand, parties make a determined effort to get absentee ballots for many senior voters in nursing homes, retirement communities, etc. That effort may be one reason the midterm turnout percentages for this group were higher on average than for the 50-64 group (74.65% versus 72.82%) and all were above 70%. Given the higher midterm turnout percentage, it comes as no surprise that the gap between presidential and midterm turnout percentages was the smallest of the five age groups at only 10.60%. That the 50-64 group had higher average presidential year turnout percentages and the 65 & over group had higher midterm year turnout percentages results in the lines crossing on a regular basis.

At a more general level, the lines in Figure 5 show (and confirm conventional wisdom for) two basic propositions. The first is that younger registrants are the least likely to vote and that the likelihood of voting increases as age increases. It is interesting to see the separation between the lines for the youngest three age groups. Although the increased turnout of the 25-34 group was usually small compared to the 18-24 group, there was a substantial increase for the 35-49 group. Although there was another increase in turnout for the oldest two groups (50-64 and 65 & Over) those final two lines are intertwined.

The second proposition is that registrants are more reliable voters as they get older. This refers to the difference between midterm and presidential election turnout. The youngest group had the greatest swing in turnout between the two types of elections at 25.65%. The next group, 25-34, still had substantial variation in turnout between midterm and presidential elections at 22.48%, but the line is somewhat smoother, in that there was less variation in turnout from one election to the next. The same is true for the 35-49 group where the drop was 18.38%. The two oldest groups also increased their turnout while reducing the differences between the two types of elections. The midterm drop for the 50-64 group was 12.76% and that of the 65 & Over group was 10.60%. Although we do not see much of an overall increase in turnout for the 65 &

Over group, we can clearly see that the line for that group is smoother than for the 50-64 group, particularly after 1994.

What is particularly remarkable about this smoothing effect as the groups get older is that it occurs at the same time that turnout was increasing. From a statistical standpoint we might expect a smoothing effect if midterm turnout increased at the same time that presidential election turnout decreased. What we see, however, is that turnout for both types of elections increases as we move up the age groups until the last group where we still see an increased turnout in midterm but not presidential elections.

Although it is a bit of a side note, the increased turnout for the 65 & Over group in midterm elections is interesting for another reason. As I previously noted, we might expect slightly reduced turnout for the oldest group due to infirmity or other problems in getting to the polls or casting ballots. Both parties recognize such problems, however, and make efforts to provide elderly registrants the opportunity to vote via absentee ballots, rides to the polls, etc. Thus, it is not surprising that presidential election turnout for the 65 & Over group was not much below that of the 50-64 group. Of course, such outreach efforts are most intense for presidential elections. That is one reason why turnout for midterm elections was lower than for presidential elections. With possibly greater difficulty in casting a ballot and reduced outreach it is a bit surprising that the 65 & Over group has had midterm turnout percentages higher than any other group.

Turnout by Age Group and Party

In the second paper in this series I examined turnout differences by party. (See Figure 3 in particular.) In the third paper I looked at the combination of gender and party. (See Figure 5 in particular.) For this paper I now look at turnout for the combination of age group and party. Figure 6 is divided into five parts based on the five age groups. For each age group the turnout for Democrats, Republicans, and No Party voters is on a separate line.

Figure 6a shows the turnout percentages for the 18-24 group. Although the 18-24 group had the lowest overall turnout percentages of the five age groups, they still fit the general pattern of Republicans having the highest turnout percentages, closely followed by Democrats, with No Party voters well behind. There were two exceptions to the general pattern for the midterm elections, which were 1982 and 2018. The turnout percentage difference between Democrats and Republicans was relatively substantial for 2018. Even though all three parties experienced a midterm drop, it was much smaller for Democrats and they ended up above the 50% mark for the first time in a midterm. There were three exceptions to the general pattern in presidential elections, which were 1988, 1992, and 2008. The 1988 and 1992 elections were both a bit odd in that the former had the lowest turnout percentages for all three parties in this age group

and the latter the highest for Democrats and No Party voters and third highest for Republicans. The 2008 election was also unusual in that the Democrats' emphasis on the youth vote managed to boost turnout of registered Democrats enough to surpass that of Republicans for this election by nearly 3%.

The gap in turnout from Democrats and Republicans to No Party voters is smaller for this age group than overall, but there is also less room to fall given the lower turnout of those in the two major parties. There are two observations worth making about the No Party turnout for this age group. First, the No Party turnout exceeds 60% for only one election (1992) and only exceeds 50% in four others (1984, 2004, 2012, and 2020). On a related point, it is interesting that turnout for No Party voters in this age group was not higher in 2008. An easy explanation, however, is that many No Party voters, including many in this age group, switched their party registration to Democrat to participate in the Democratic caucuses. That likely left the remaining No Party voters with a higher than usual proportion of the less politically engaged. On the other hand, the same explanation does not seem to hold for 2020 where a large number of No Party voters, possibly the more politically engaged, switched their registration to one of the major parties to participate in the June primary.

The second observation is that midterm No Party turnout for this age group only exceeds 30% once (1982) and only exceeds 20% for a midterm election after 1990 once, in 2018. This means that fewer than one in five No Party voters in this age group voted in midterm elections in the 20 years from 1994 to 2014.

Figure 6b shows turnout by party for the 25-34 group. Consistent with the overall party turnout results, as well as overall age group turnout, we see that turnout for this group was higher than the 18-24 group for all three parties, but not a lot. There was more separation between Democrats and Republicans for this age group. The turnout percentage for Democrats exceeded that of Republicans for only two presidential elections (1988 and 2008), though in both cases by a smaller margin than had been the case for the 18-24 group. Republicans led Democrats in turnout for all 10 midterm elections.

Figure 6c shows turnout by party for the 35-49 group. Again, the same pattern persists with minor differences. As expected, turnout was again higher for all three parties. We also see complete separation between Democrats and Republicans, with Republicans having higher turnout for all 20 elections, though the difference for 1988 was only 0.24%

Figure 6d shows turnout by party for the 50-64 group. I am starting to sound like a broken record, but we again see the same pattern. Turnout for all three parties was higher than the 35-49 group. Republicans again had higher turnout than Democrats for all 20 elections, though the separation between them was a bit smaller for some of the years.

Figure 6e is the final figure and it shows turnout by party for the 65 & Over group. We saw in Figure 5 that overall turnout for the 65 & Over group was the first to not have higher turnout percentages than the next younger group, in this instance the 50-64 group.

By separating this age group by party we see that No Party voters in the 65 & Over group produced the same mixed pattern as in Figure 5. Specifically, their turnout percentage was lower than No Party voters in the 50-64 group for seven of the 10 presidential elections, but higher for five of the 10 midterm elections. Notice also that the midterm turnout percentage for No Party voters in this group decreased in the next three midterm elections from the period high of 81.83% in 1992 to the period low of 51.51% in 2002. It then increased in each successive midterm election to reach 65.57% for 2018, the highest percentage of the entire period.

For Democrats, compared to the 50-64 group those in the 65 & Over group also had a mixed record. They had a lower turnout percentage for six of the 10 presidential years, but higher in six of the 10 midterm elections. Republicans in the 65 & Over group did not follow this trend as their turnout percentages were lower than Republicans in the 50-64 group for all but the 1988, 2014, 2016, and 2018 elections (2020 by a mere 0.03%). Interestingly, however, despite a reduction in the 65 & Over Republicans' turnout percentages from the younger age group, their percentages were still higher than that of Democrats in this group for 19 of the 20 elections (all but 1992), though sometimes only barely as in the 2002, 2004, and 2006 elections when the differences were only 0.70%, 0.20%, and 0.55%, respectively.

Concluding Comments

In addition to the details from the various figures there are several points worth noting about the registration and turnout data.

First, unlike the voter registration data examined in the first paper in this series there was not much of a difference in turnout percentages for the wave midterm elections of 2006 and 2010. For 2006 we might have expected Democrats to have increased their turnout percentage, but in looking at the five parts of Figure 6 that does not appear to be the case. In fact, for all five age groups Democrats' turnout percentage in 2006 was below that of 2002. On the other hand, Republicans turnout percentage was also down for all five age groups in 2006 compared to 2002. Thus, even though the Republican turnout percentage in 2006 was higher than that of Democrats in 2006 for all five age

groups, the gap was sufficiently narrowed that it helps to explain Democrats' electoral success in Iowa that year.¹⁵

The turnout percentage for 2010 shows a bit more of a correlation with the surge in registrations for Republicans. Compared to the six prior midterm elections, in 2010 Democrats had their lowest midterm turnout percentage for three of the five age groups and second lowest for the other two. In contrast, although 2010 was not the highest turnout percentage year for any of the Republicans' five age groups, it is the year we see the largest gap in turnout percentage between Democrats and Republicans of any of the 20 elections for four of the five age groups and a close second in the fifth.

Second, I have not mentioned it before (including in the prior papers in the series) but there was great anticipation by many that 2018 would be a wave year for Democrats. This might have been wishful thinking on the part of some because the year did not seem to have the same feel that a wave was coming as was the case in 2006 and 2010. Nevertheless, Democrats did manage to flip 40 or so seats in the US House, including two in Iowa, to retake control. In the results presented here we saw in Figure 5 that there was improved midterm turnout across all five age groups. When breaking the age groups into parties in Figure 6 we saw that the improved midterm turnout occurred for voters of all three parties in all five age groups. One indication that Democrats might have been more enthused in 2018 than Republicans, however, was that for the three youngest age groups (Figures 6a to 6c) the improved midterm turnout for Democrats was greater than that of Republicans.

Third, the increasing turnout percentages across the three parties as voters age may be a reflection of their greater knowledge of Congressional and state races. At one level this may simply mean older voters have had more time to learn about such offices. At another level the increases may reflect a greater understanding of the importance of such offices. As noted previously, both parties work hard to motivate younger voters, but those efforts diminish for midterm elections, so younger voters may simply not know about the offices and candidates and may not make an effort to find out. Aside from accumulated knowledge, as voters age they will have more contacts with various levels of government (licenses, taxes, permits, etc.) and may be more interested in government and office holders than when younger.

Fourth, and along similar lines, the reduction of No Party voters relative to those of either party as voters age (Figures 3a to 3e) is consistent with the notion that younger voters may not yet have sorted out their ideological leanings, but do so as they age. Voters can change their official party identification at any time, but will have a tendency to move from No Party to either Democrat or Republican and then stay with

¹⁵ Aside from other offices, Iowa Democrats held on to the Governor's office in an open race and picked up two US House seats, one by defeating a longtime incumbent.

that party except in extraordinary circumstances. The 2008 Iowa Caucuses are an example of an extraordinary circumstance. As detailed in the first paper in this series, the historic nature of the Obama and Clinton candidacies drove interest for the Democratic Caucuses and many No Party registrants switched to Democrat to participate. Similarly, though to a lesser extent, heated Republican primaries in 2010 seem to have caused many No Party registrants to switch to Republican. Over time some of those who switched might return to No Party status, but likely fewer than initially switched.

Extraordinary circumstances certainly describes the situation in 2020. Because of the pandemic, every voter in Iowa was sent an absentee ballot request from prior to the June primary. The sharp drop in the number of No Party voters, detailed here and in previous papers in the series, was the result of these voters requesting a primary ballot for one of the parties. After the general election there was a larger than usual number of voters who switched back to No Party. It will be interesting to see how this affects the age groups in 2022.

Fifth, although No Party registrants may start from a place of lesser interest in politics and government, campaigns certainly work to get their votes as well as those of the people who are already registered for their party. Nevertheless, No Party voters likely feel less connected to officeholders of either party. This might make it easier for them to ignore appeals to vote or support candidates who are not “one of them.”

Finally, the surge in No Party voters after 1994 continues to be reflected in both registration and turnout statistics. After 1994 the turnout pattern for the age groups became much more regular for all voters as it was when looking at voters by party (the second paper in the series) and sex (the third paper in the series). In Figure 5 there was a fairly distinct “W” pattern formed by the lines between the 1984 and 1992 elections. That pattern also appeared in Figure 6 when the age groups were separated by party, though it faded for each older group so that it was essentially gone for the 65 & Over group (Figure 6e). It will be interesting to see the extent to which these differences hold in later papers.

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

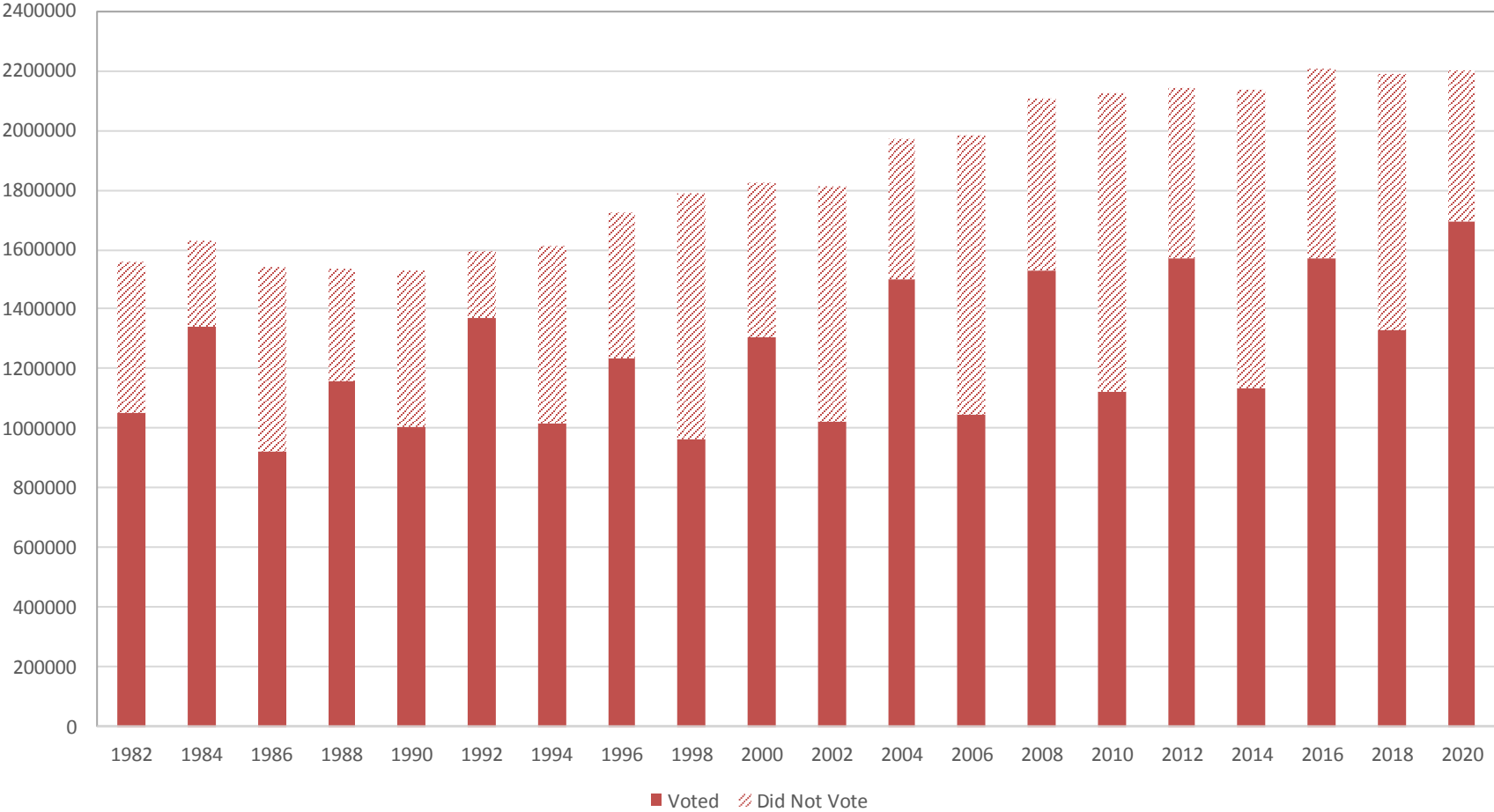


Figure 1b: Turnout Percentage of Iowa Registered Voters in Elections Since 1982

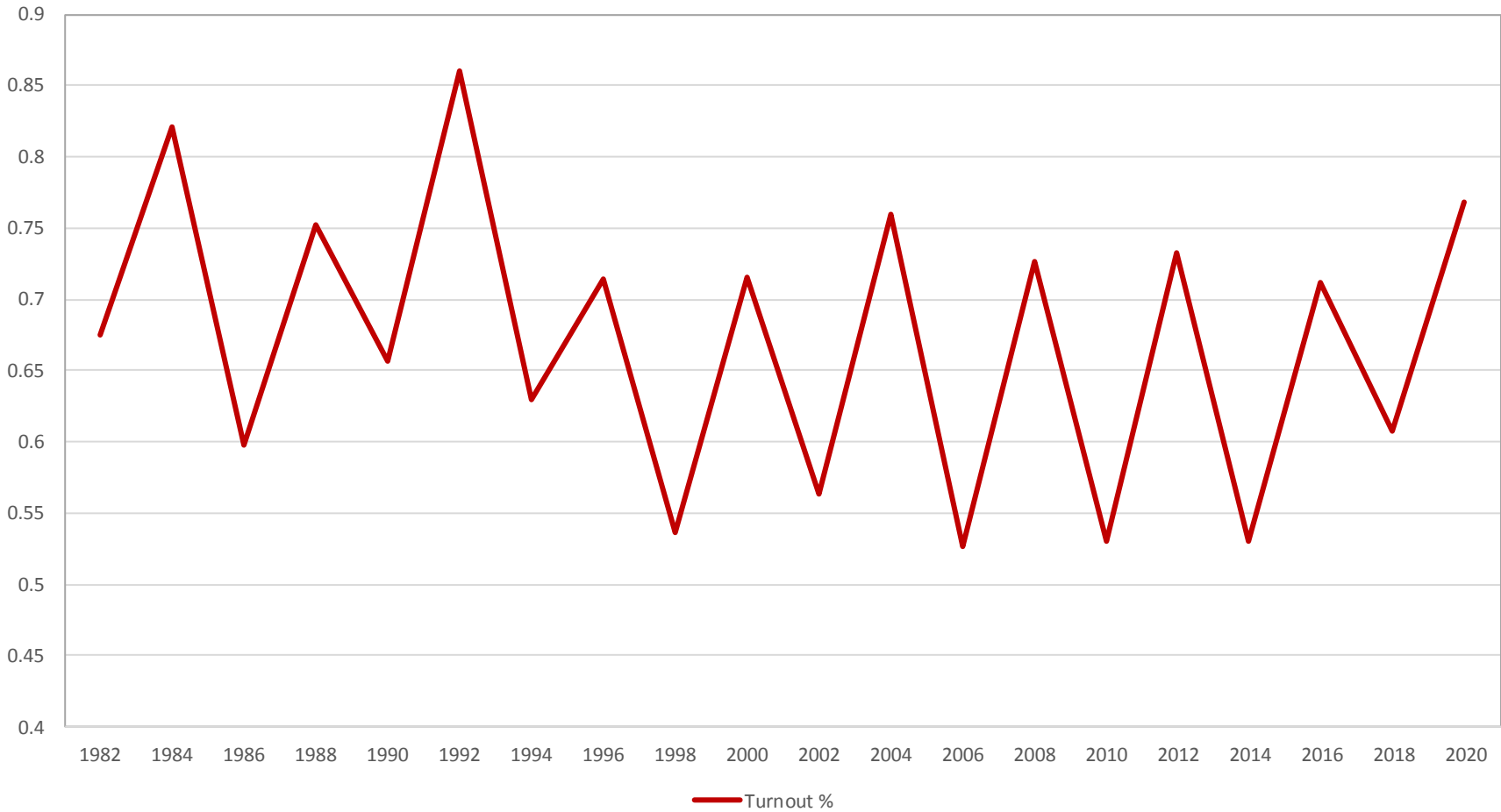


Figure 2: Iowa Registered Voters by Age Group in Election Years Since 1982

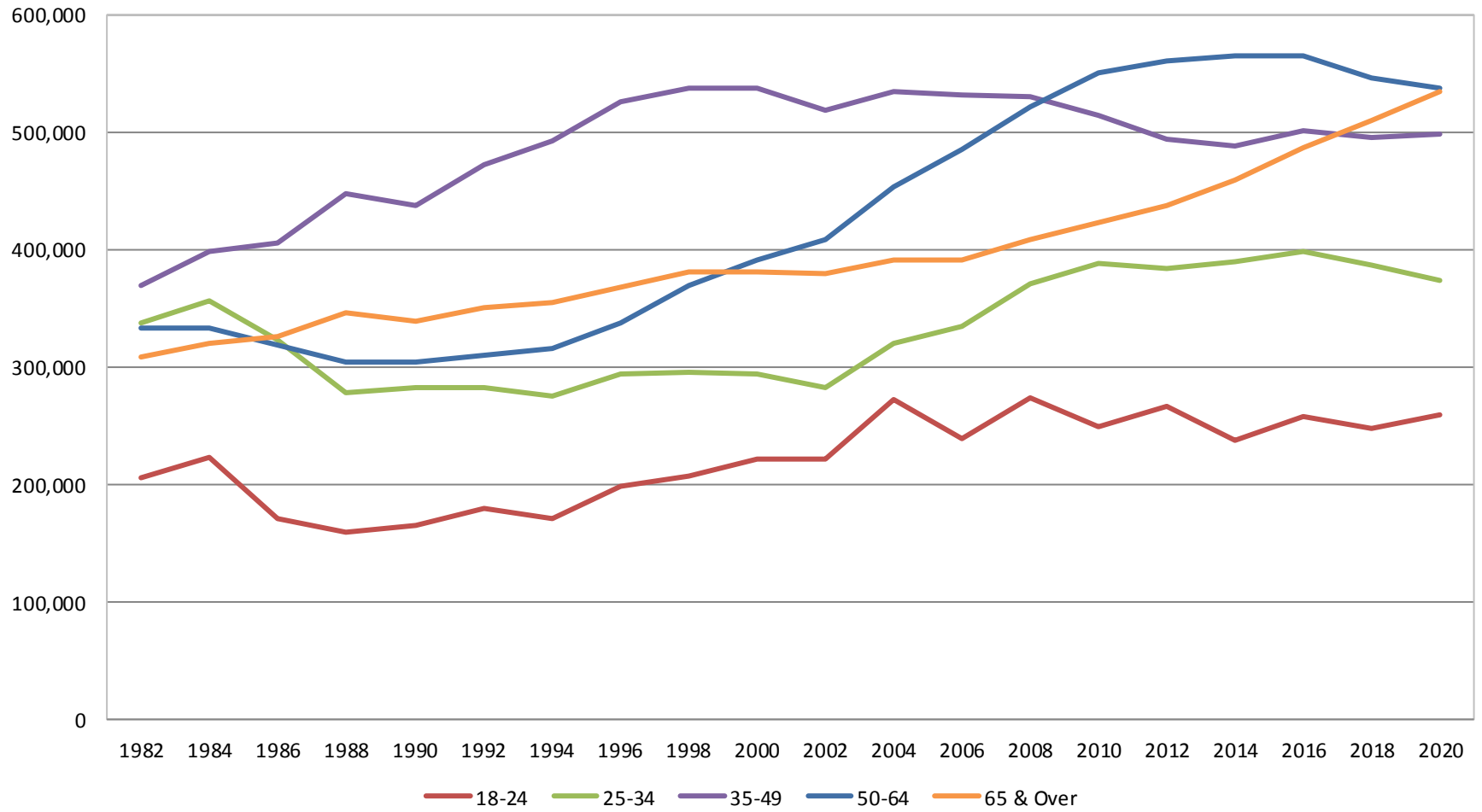


Figure 3a: Iowa Registered Voters in Age Group 18-24 by Party in Election Years Since 1982

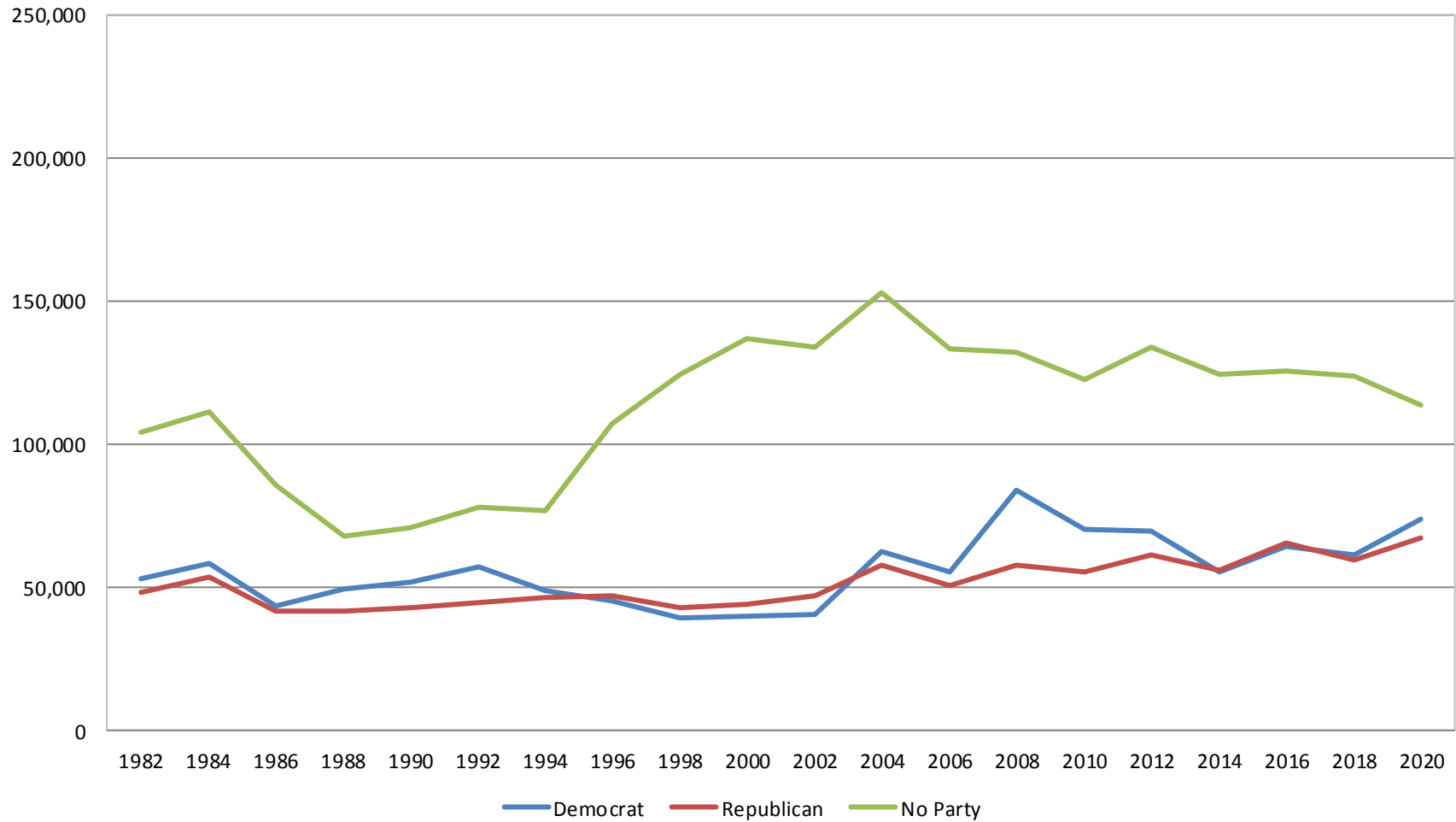


Figure 3b: Iowa Registered Voters in Age Group 25-34 by Party in Election Years Since 1982

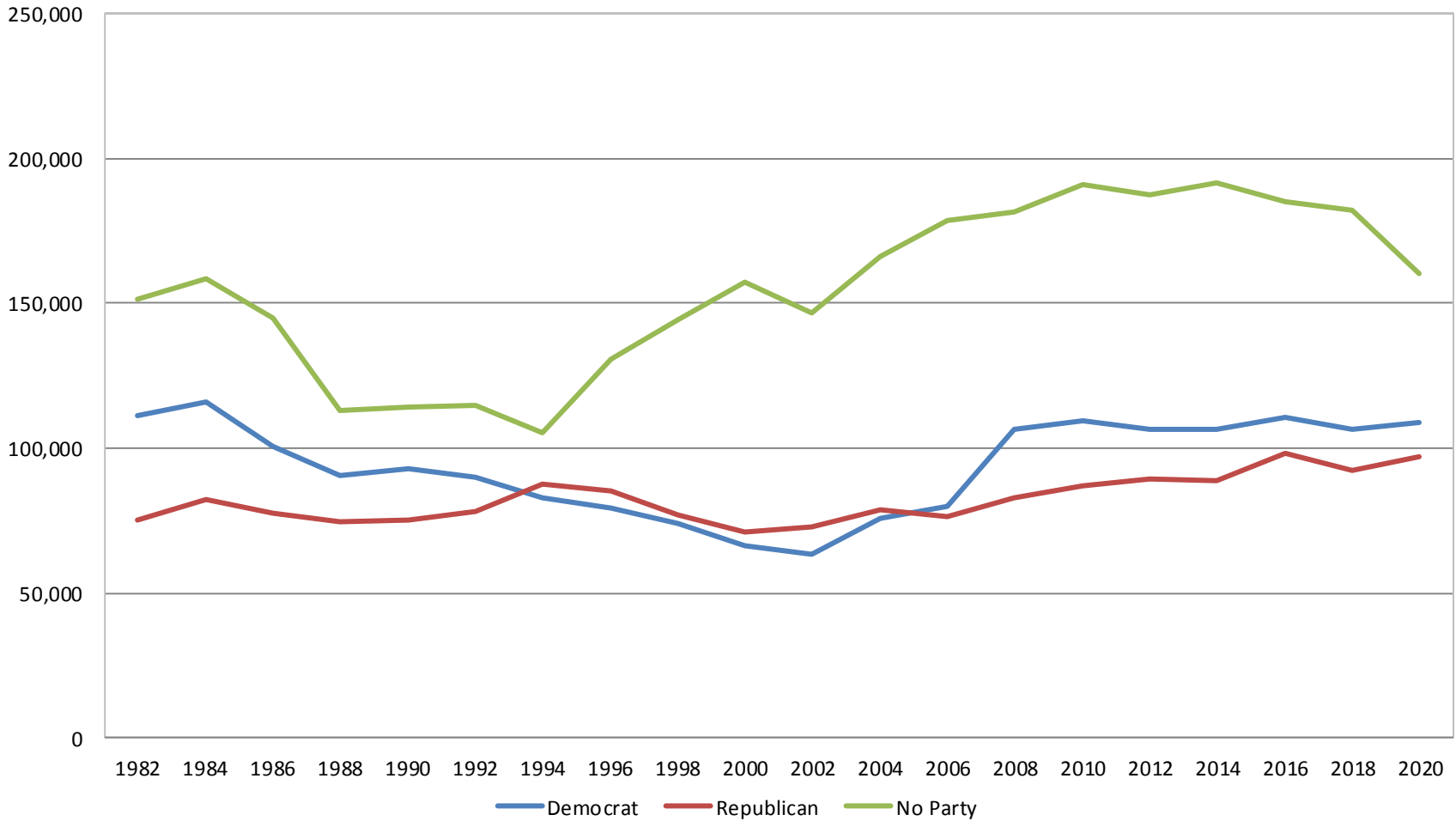


Figure 3c: Iowa Registered Voters in Age Group 35-49 by Party in Election Years Since 1982

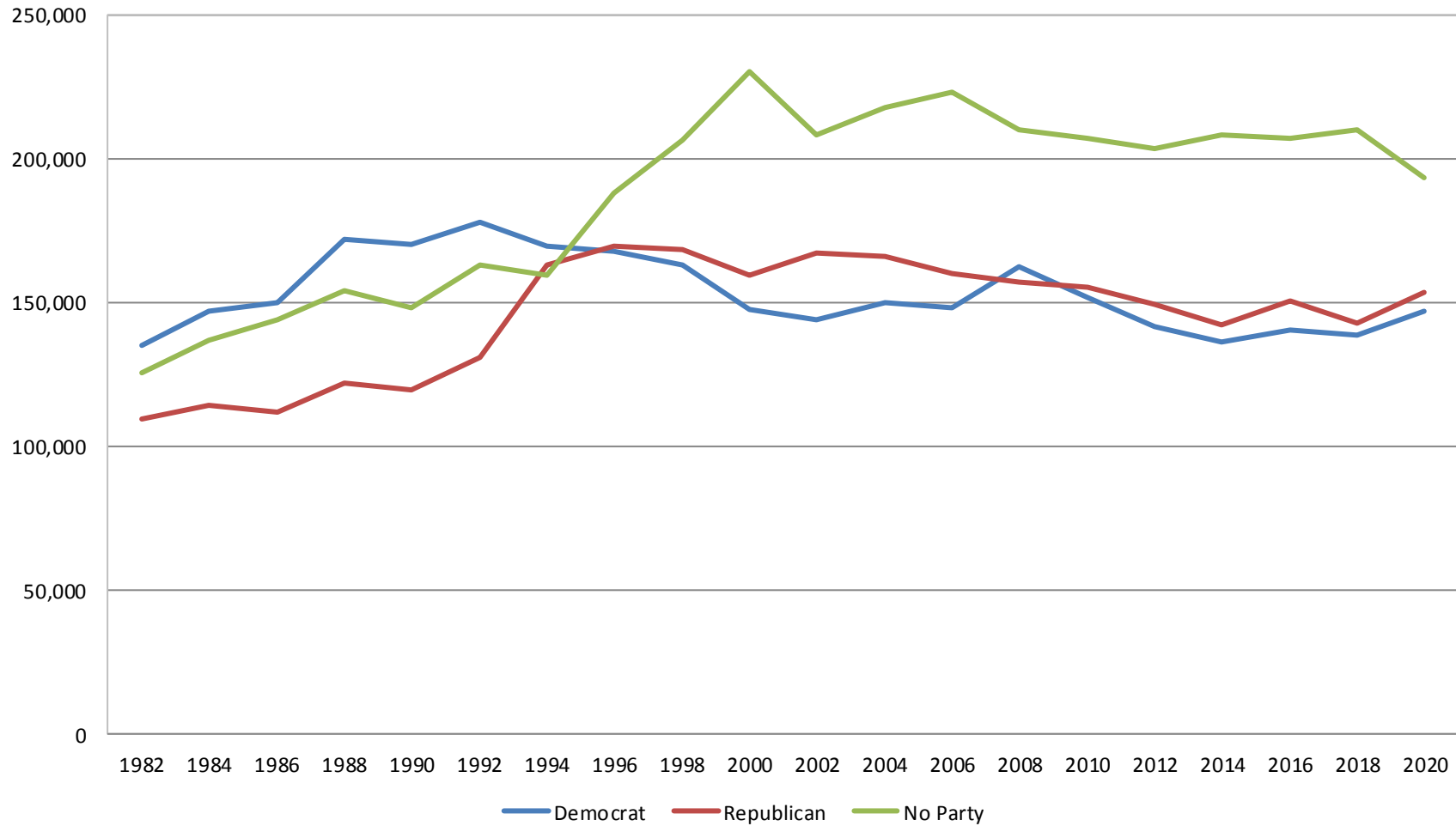


Figure 3d: Iowa Registered Voters in Age Group 50-64 by Party in Election Years Since 1982

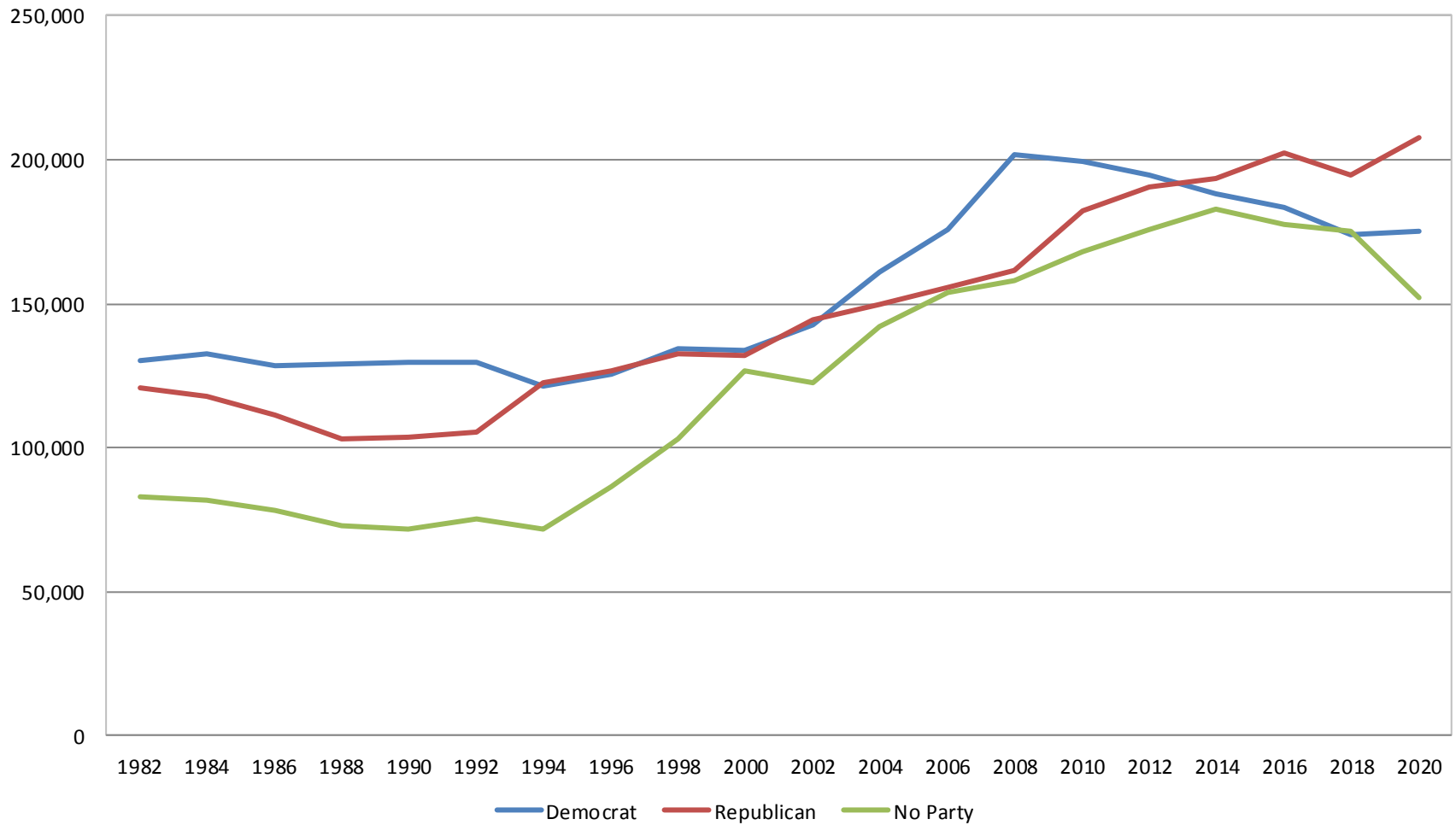


Figure 3e: Iowa Registered Voters in Age Group 65 & Over by Party in Election Years Since 1982

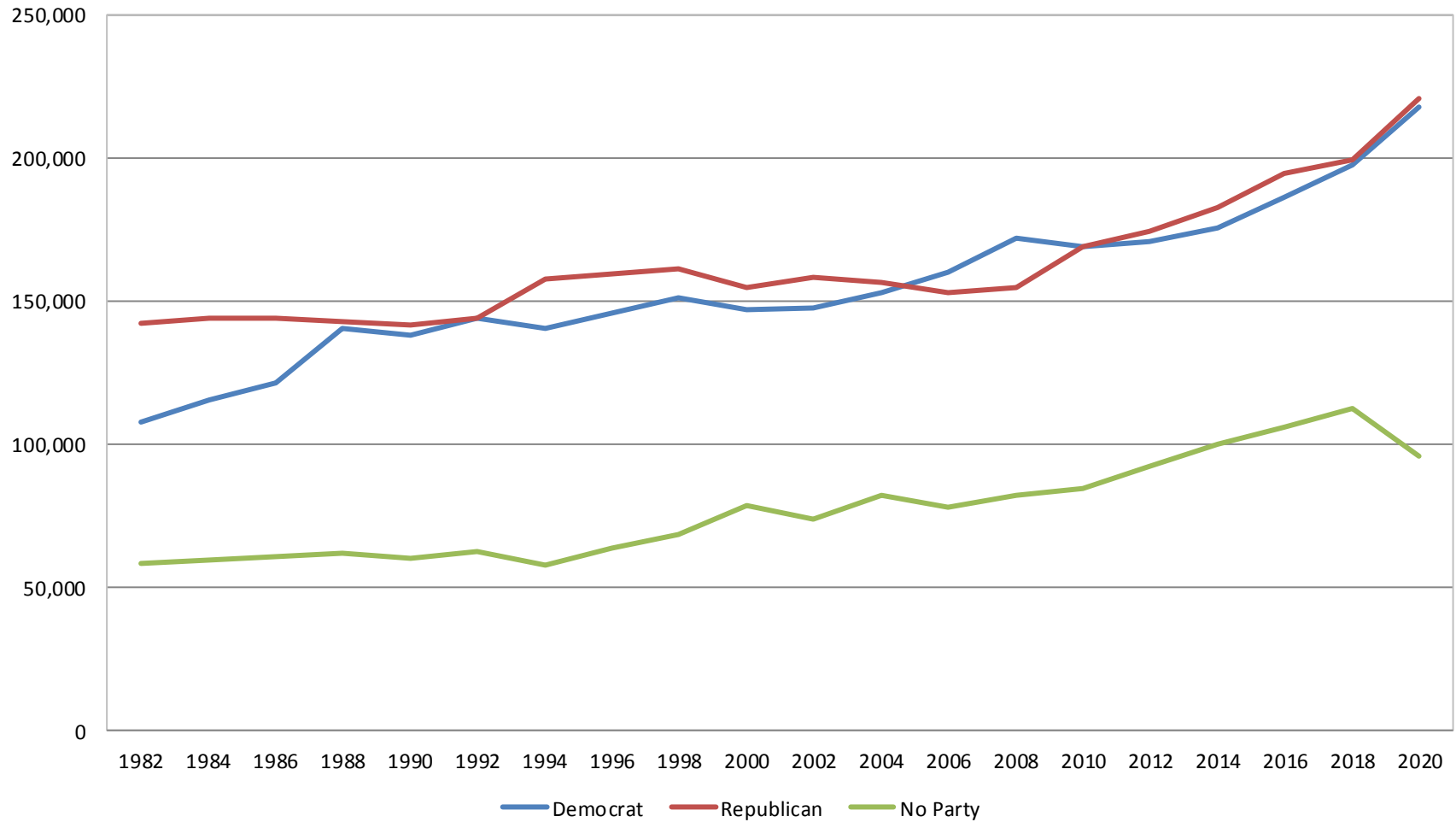


Figure 4a: Iowa Registered Voters 18-24, Number Voting, and Turnout Percentage in Election Years Since 1982

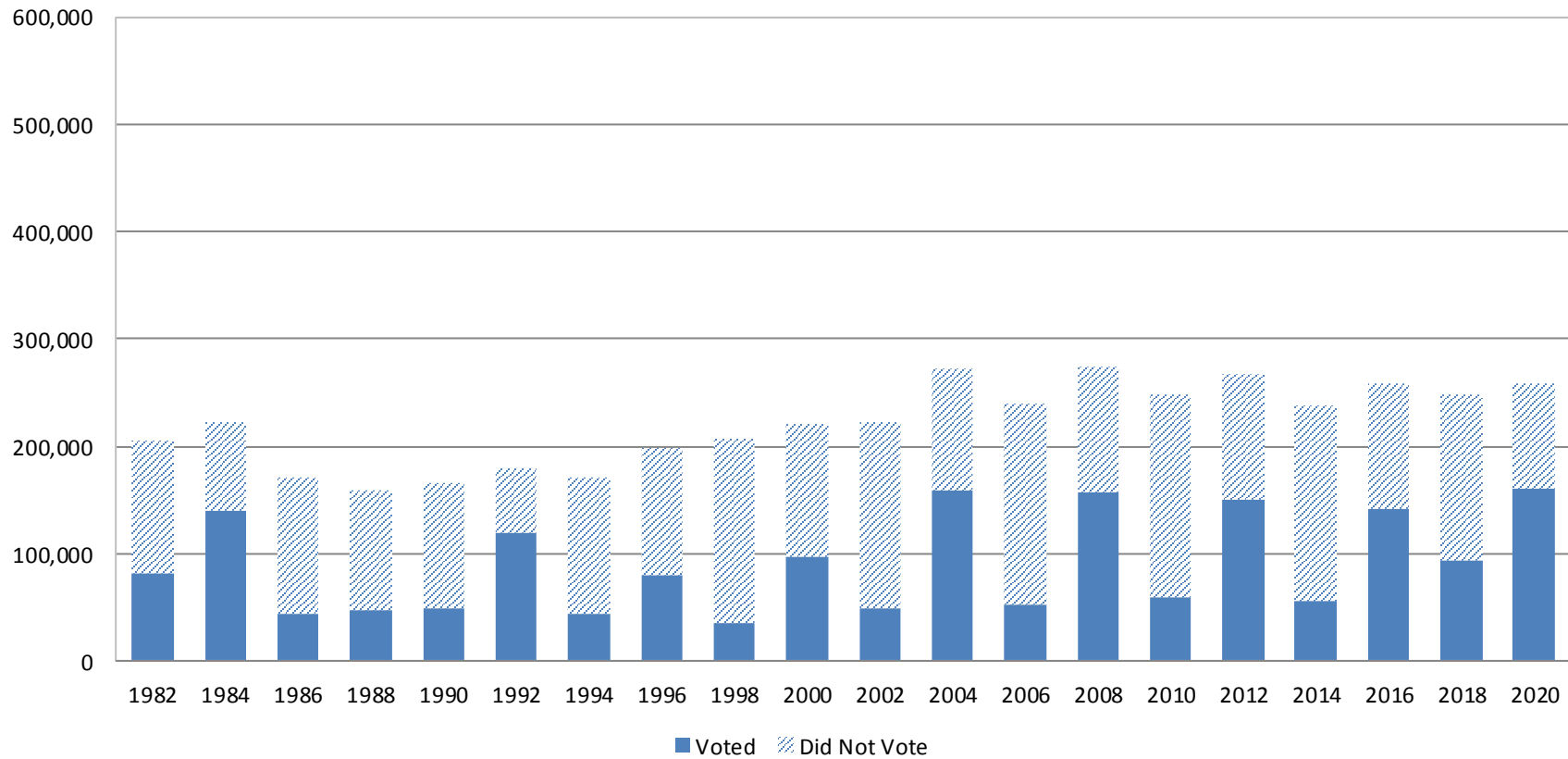


Figure 4b: Iowa Registered Voters 25-34, Number Voting, and Turnout Percentage in Election Years Since 1982

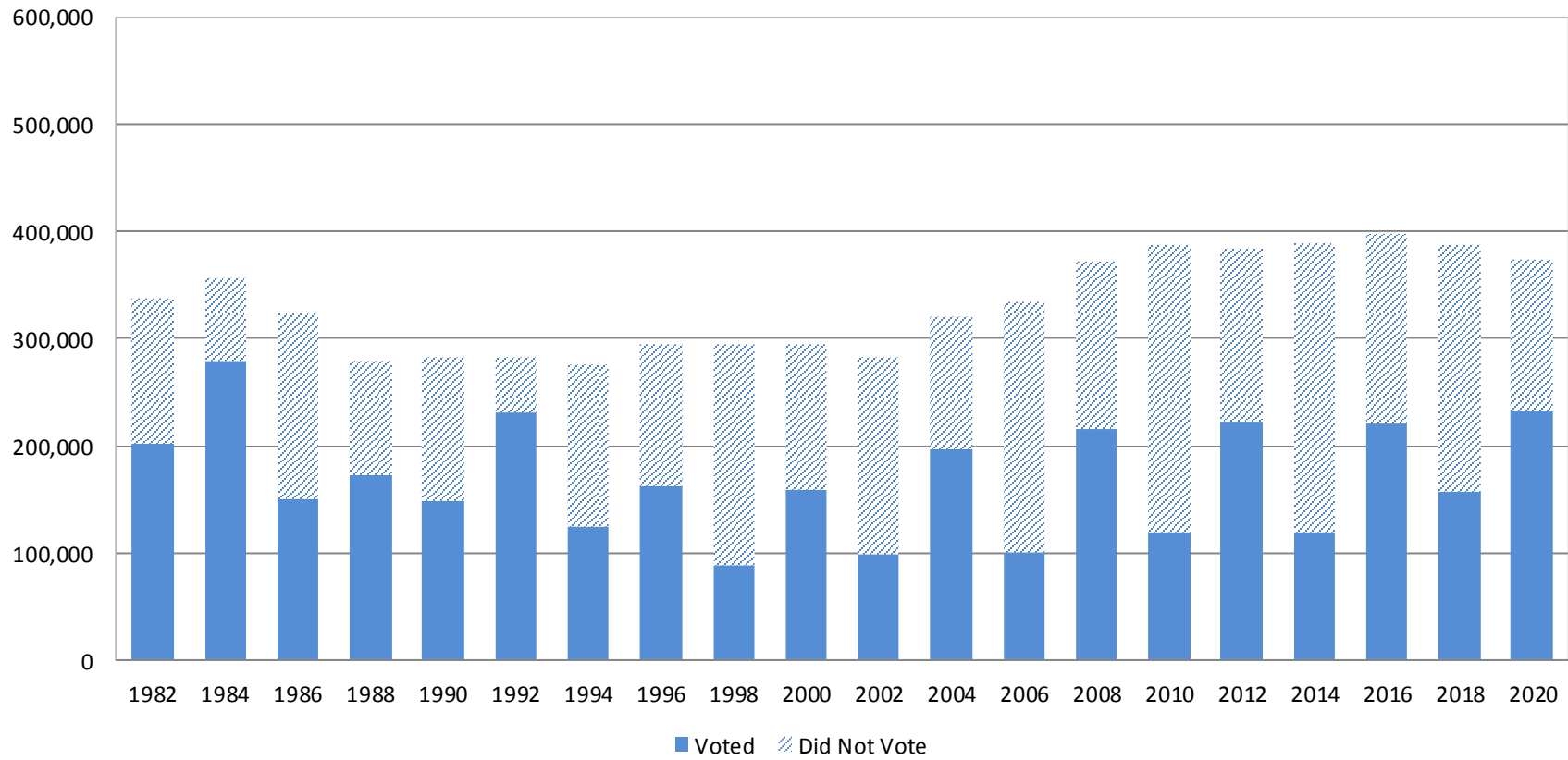


Figure 4c: Iowa Registered Voters 35-49, Number Voting, and Turnout Percentage in Election Years Since 1982

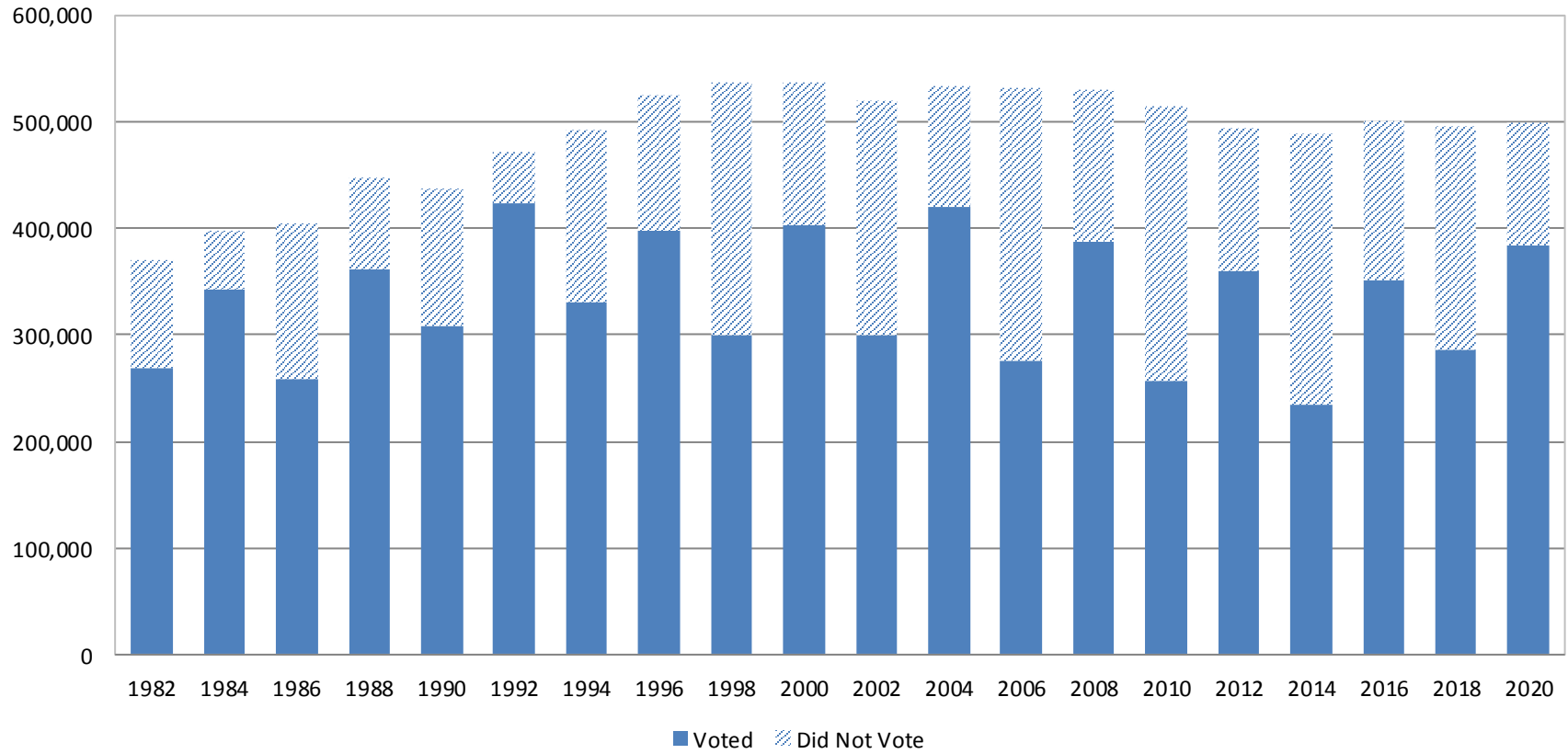


Figure 4d: Iowa Registered Voters 50-64, Number Voting, and Turnout Percentage in Election Years Since 1982

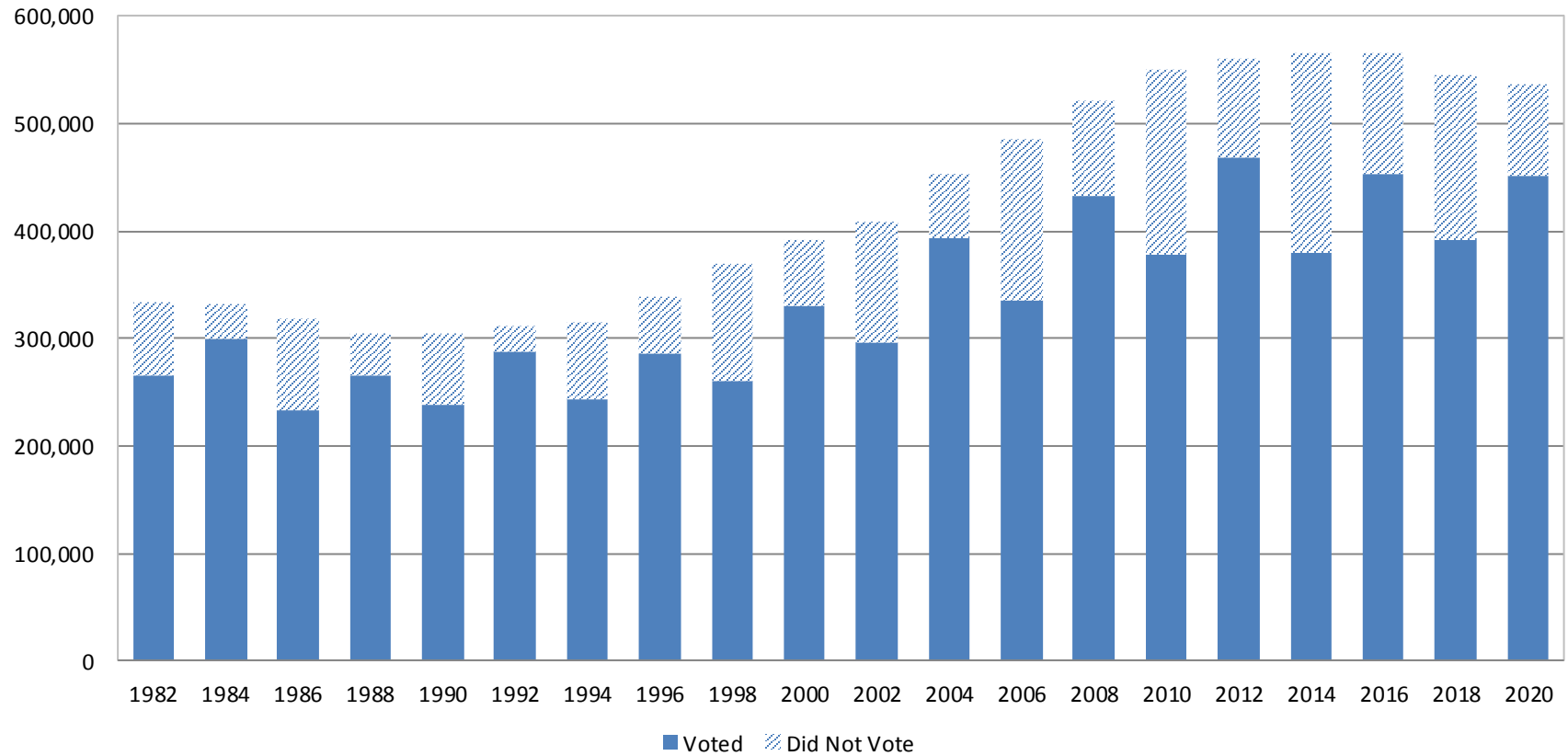


Figure 4e: Iowa Registered Voters 65 & Over, Number Voting, and Turnout Percentage in Election Years Since 1982

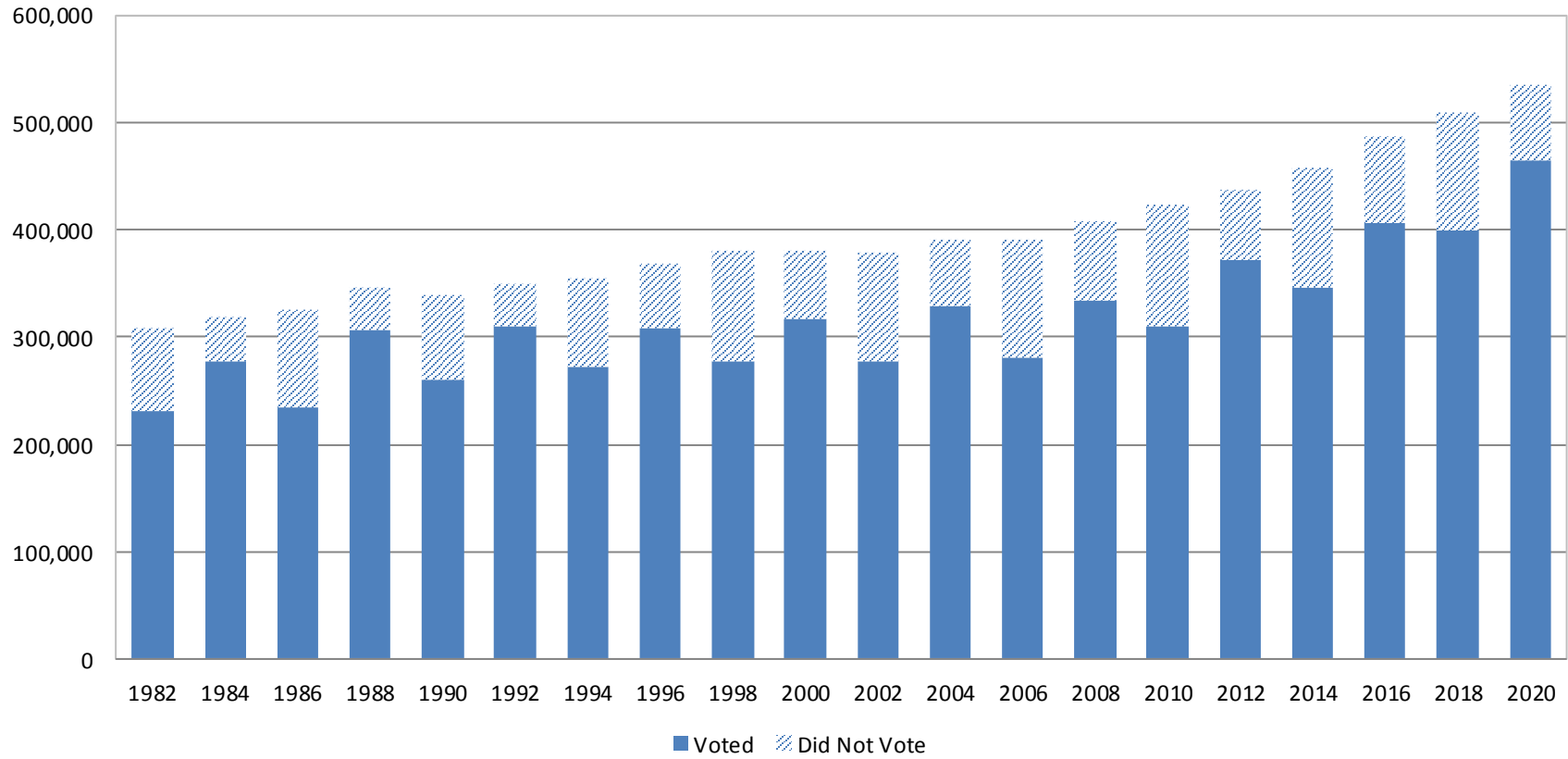


Figure 5: Iowa Voter Turnout Percentage by Age Group in Election Years Since 1982

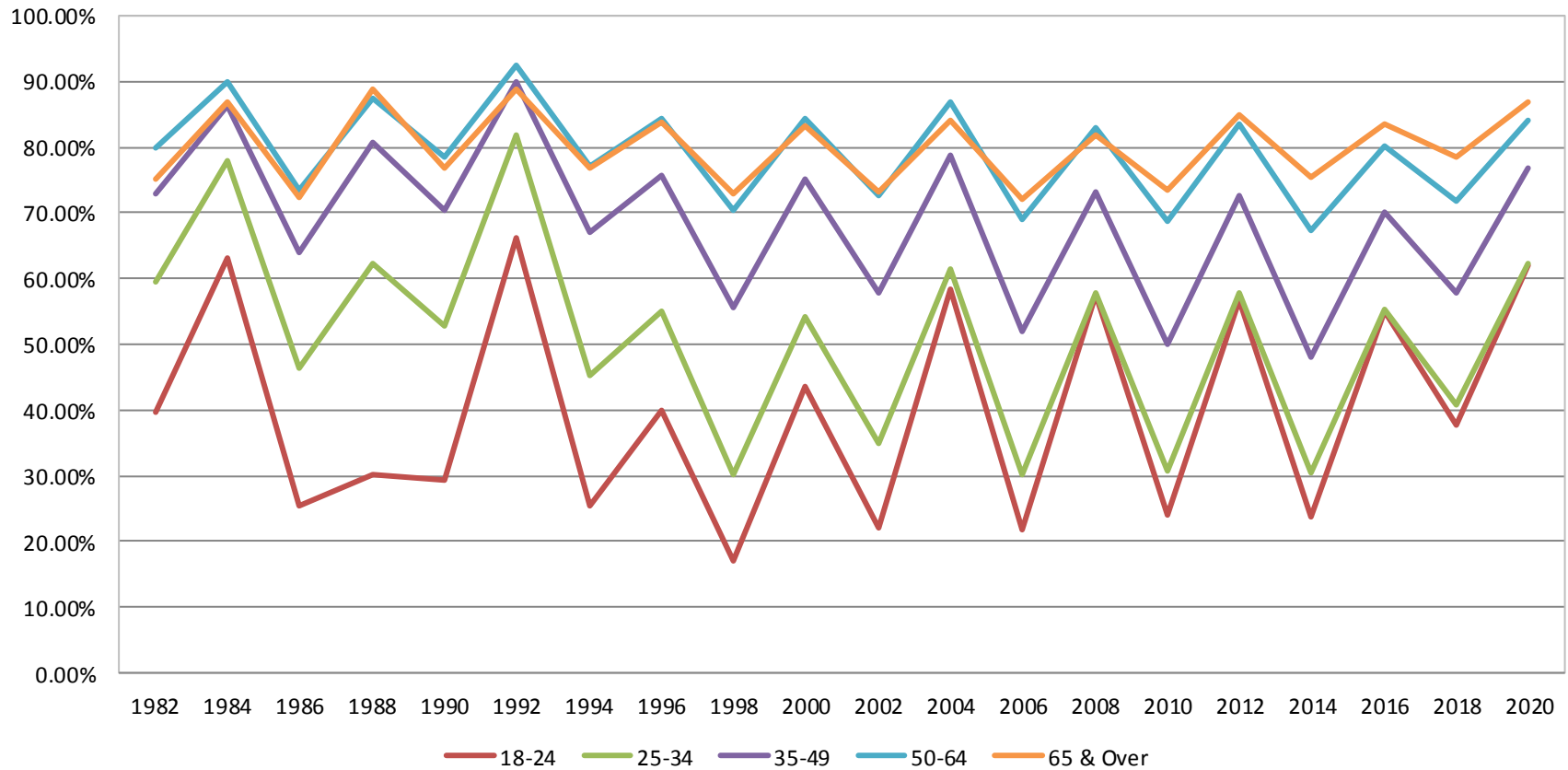


Figure 6a: Iowa Voter Turnout Percentage for Age Group 18-24 by Party in Election Years Since 1982

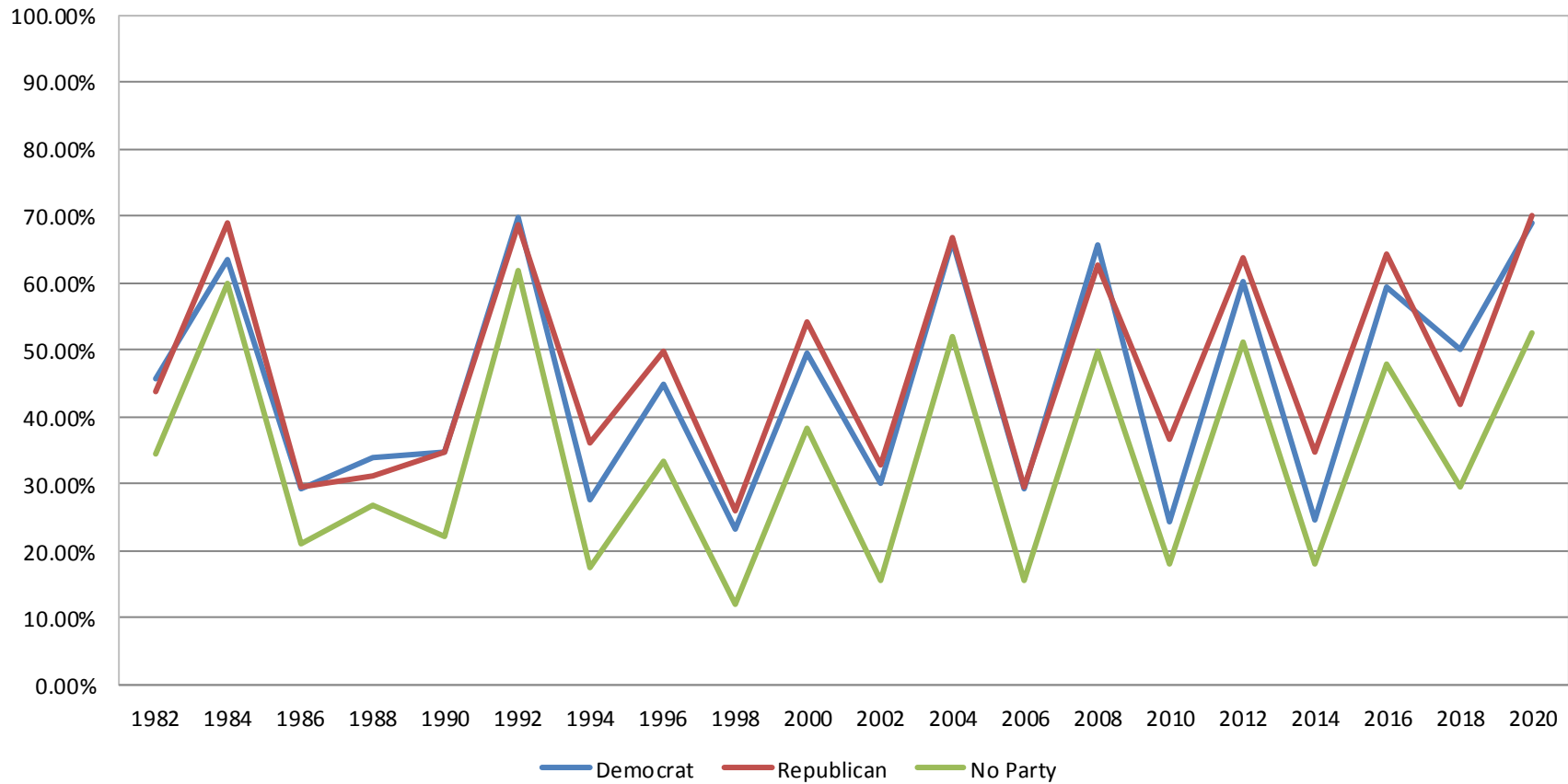


Figure 6b: Iowa Voter Turnout Percentage for Age Group 25-34 by Party in Election Years Since 1982

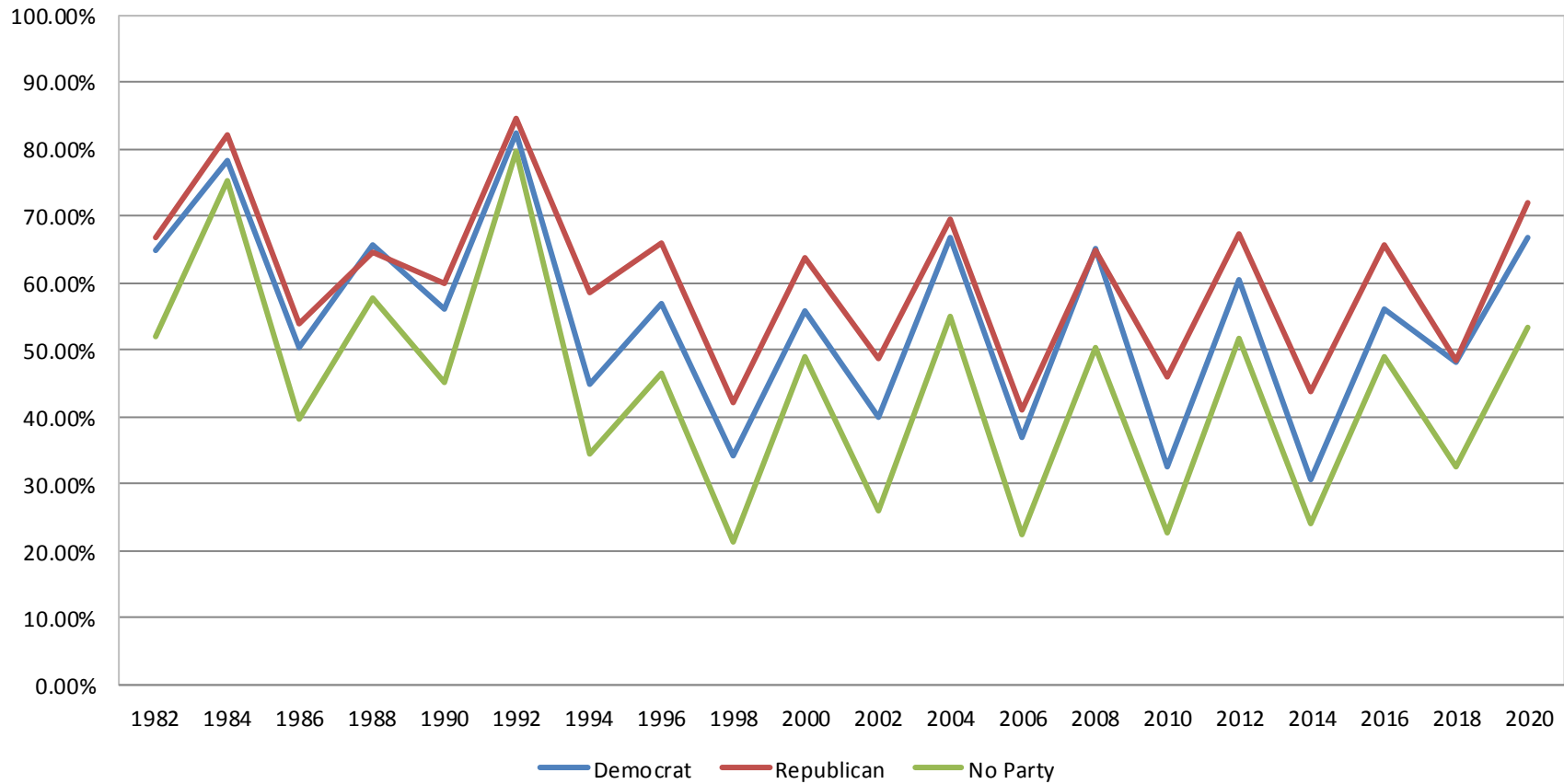


Figure 6c: Iowa Voter Turnout Percentage for Age Group 35-49 by Party in Election Years Since 1982

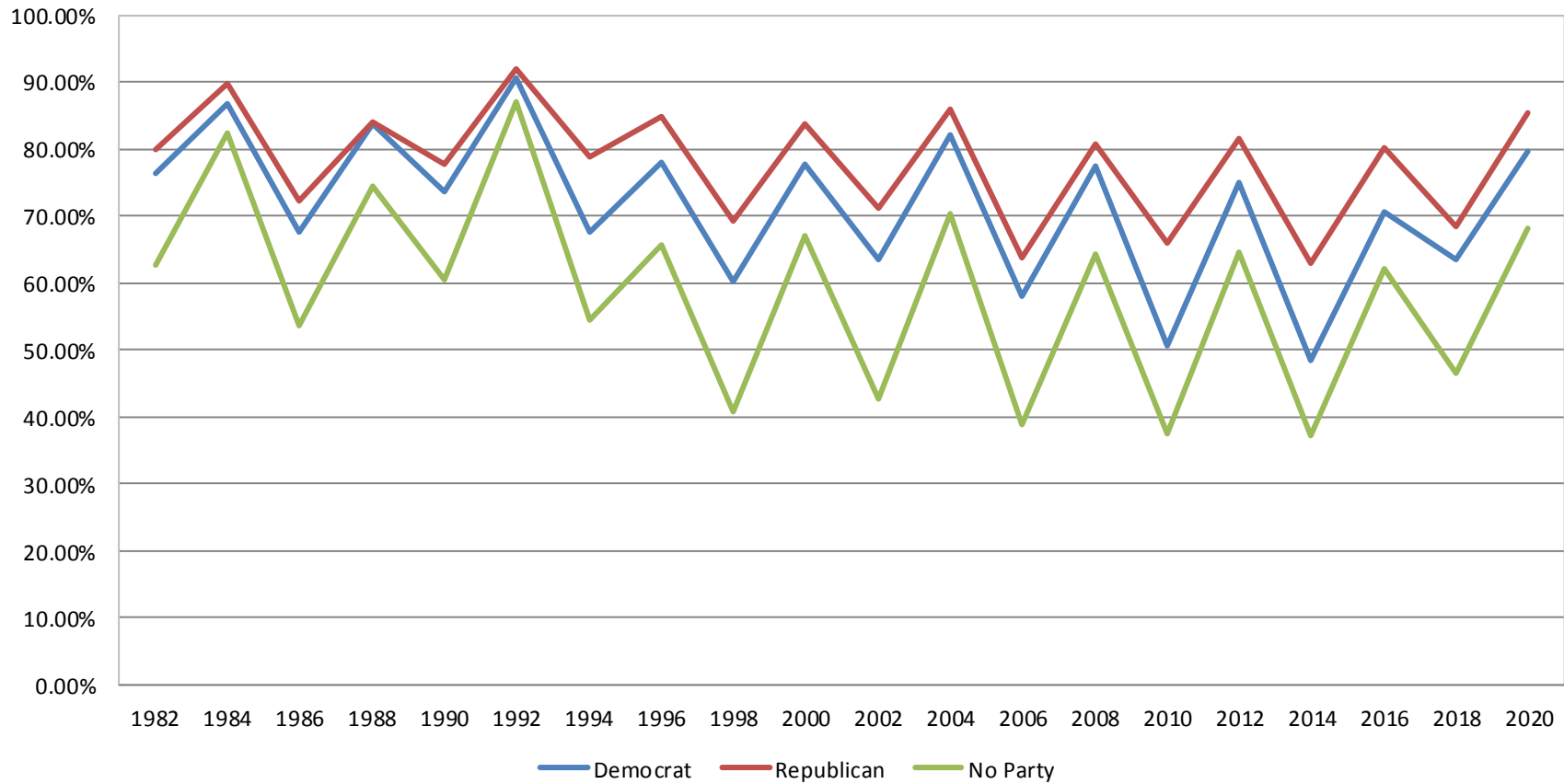
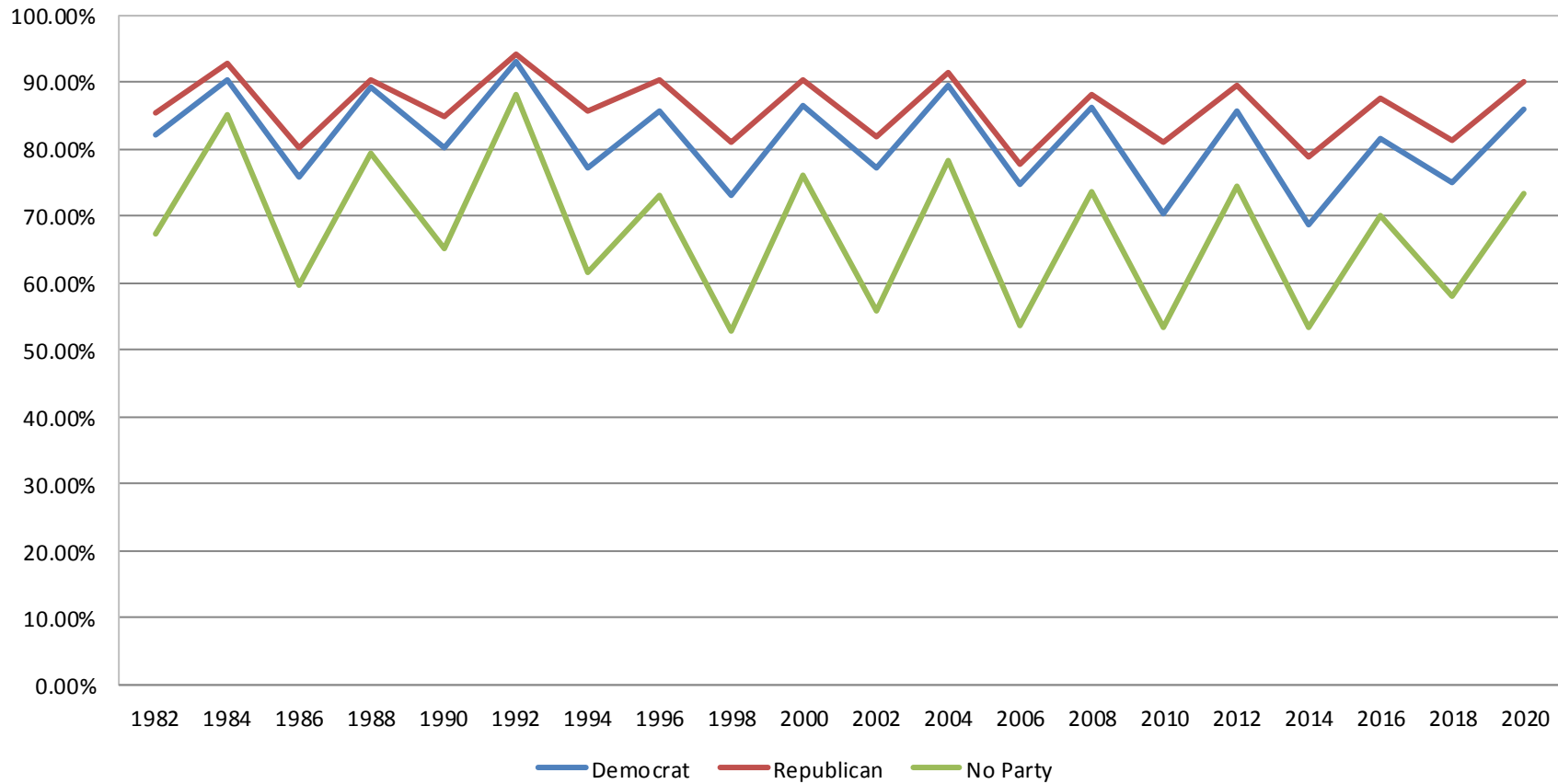


Figure 6d: Iowa Voter Turnout Percentage for Age Group 50-64 by Party in Election Years Since 1982



**Figure 6e: Iowa Voter Turnout Percentage for Age Group 65 & Over
by Party in Election Years Since 1982**

