

# **Iowa Voting Series, Paper 9: An Examination of Iowa Voter Turnout in Primary Elections Since 2000**

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## **Abstract**

This is the ninth paper in a series examining aspects of voting in Iowa. In this paper I focus on the primaries ahead of the general elections from 2000 on. The data for primaries is not as complete as for general elections, so the focus will be on party turnout (Democrat and Republican) state-wide as well as within Congressional Districts. As with the prior papers in this series my focus will be on the statistics involved rather than theorizing about the reasons for particular distributions. That said, because specific electoral contests likely drive turnout in certain years (state-wide or in the Congressional Districts) I will speculate a bit more in this paper about the reasons for differences in turnout. On the whole, primary turnout in Iowa is not a generally reliable indicator of general election turnout. This is due in part to the fact that presidential candidates do not appear on presidential year primary ballots because of the Iowa Caucuses. It is no surprise that factors such as open seats, weak incumbents, or competitive primaries with quality candidates will tend to increase turnout, particularly at the Congressional District level.

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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.

- August 2014: Initial release; link and footnote 1 update after posting (May, 2015)
- August 2016: Update to include 2016 primary data
- May 2019: Update to include 2018 primary data and related text changes
- May 2021: Update to include 2020 primary data and related text changes

# Iowa Voting Series, Paper 9: An Examination of Iowa Voter Turnout in Primary Elections Since 2000

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In prior papers in this series<sup>1</sup> I examined Iowa's turnout statistics in midterm and presidential general elections since 2000 in various combinations of party, sex, and age group.<sup>2</sup> In this paper I focus on the primaries ahead of the general elections from 2000 on. As described below, the data for primaries is not as complete as for general elections, so the focus will be on party turnout (Democrat and Republican) state-wide as well as within Congressional Districts. As with the prior papers in this series my focus will be on the statistics involved rather than theorizing about the reasons for particular distributions. That said, because specific electoral contests likely drive turnout in certain years (state-wide or in the Congressional Districts) I will speculate a bit more in this paper about the reasons for differences in turnout. In addition, the goal of this paper, like the others in the series, is to examine aspects of voting in Iowa with an eye to future elections and to provide some background and context to discussions about Iowa voters.

## Data

As with prior papers, data for this examination were gathered from the Election Results & Statistics page of the Iowa Secretary of State's website.<sup>3</sup> This page provides links to election results for a variety of primary and general election contests in Iowa, including those for presidential and midterm elections. The data examined here are usually obtained from the Official Canvass by County links.<sup>4</sup> The Official Canvass shows the

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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 state-wide turnout statistics not from any particular contest except when a particular race is used as an example or needed to get a more accurate voter count.

<sup>3</sup> <http://sos.iowa.gov/elections/results/index.html>

<sup>4</sup> For example, the turnout statistics for the 2000 presidential election can be found at <http://sos.iowa.gov/elections/pdf/primcanv.pdf>.

vote totals for the various races that were on the primary ballot. For the 2002 primary there is no single Official Canvass link, rather, there are separate links to several races. One problem in using the Official Canvass is that through the 2006 election data there was no indication of undervotes in the report.<sup>5</sup> In addition, relying on particular races for a count of how many voters from a particular party turned out was difficult when there was only one candidate and a large number of undervotes. As a result, for particular years or Congressional Districts I looked at more than one race to find the best count of the number of voters who turned out. The Election Results & Statistics page also has a Turnout Report link for each election. The format for these reports varied dramatically over the period examined, but they nevertheless provided useful information for determining the number of Democrats and Republicans who voted in a particular primary.<sup>6</sup>

Given that I will be examining turnout percentages in this paper, I also need to determine the number of registered voters at the time of the primary. Again, data for earlier primaries do not specify the number of registered voters. Iowa's primaries are in June, so one could use the June voter registration figures that are issued at the beginning of each month. Unfortunately, these figures do not reflect the actual number of voters on the day of the primary. County auditors, the officials in charge of local voter registration, used to have 45 days to forward new or changed voter registrations to the Iowa Secretary of State's office. Along with same day voter registration, that means all the changes that may have occurred as late as the day of the primary might not be included in the monthly voter registration figures until the August report. Based on prior examinations of the voter registration data,<sup>7</sup> it appears that the bulk of any voter registration changes are included in the state data by the July report. Thus, I will use the figures in the July report as the denominator in calculating primary turnout percentages when data is not available for election day.

At this point in prior papers I mentioned a caution regarding how certain turnout statistics were not always consistent in how voters in an Other category (i.e., those not registered as Democrat, Republican, or No Party) were handled. Although that caution is worth remembering, it does not apply to the data for this paper given that the focus here is specifically on party primaries and those registered as either Democrat or Republican.

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<sup>5</sup> "Undervotes" are instances when a voter does not make a selection for a particular race. I discuss them a bit more in the eighth paper in the series.

<sup>6</sup> For example, compare the simple format of the Turnout Report for the 2000 primary (<http://sos.iowa.gov/elections/pdf/primturn.pdf>) with the more detailed format for the 2014 primary (<http://sos.iowa.gov/elections/pdf/2014/primary/turnout.pdf>).

<sup>7</sup> See the first paper in the series.

## Primary and General Election Turnout

Figure 1 shows the Iowa primary and general election turnout for Democrats and Republicans for elections since 2000.<sup>8</sup> The top two darker lines represent the general election turnout. Though they begin with the 2000 election, these top two lines are the same as were presented in Figure 3 of the second paper in the series. The bottom two lighter lines represent the corresponding primary election turnout.

Two differences between the primary and general election lines are immediately apparent. The first difference is simply how much lower the turnout was in primary elections than general elections for both parties. The smallest difference between the primary and general election lines occurs in 2010 when the highest primary turnout of 37.35% occurred, which was for Republicans, and the lowest general election turnout of 56.48% occurred, which was for Democrats. Turning to intra-party differences, the smallest occurred in 2010 when the difference for Republicans was 31.63%. The Republicans' difference in 2002 was not much larger at 34.38%. The smallest difference for Democrats occurred in 2006 when the difference was 37.11%. The second smallest difference for Democrats was 38.17% in 2018. The largest difference for both parties occurred in 2004. Although Republicans had the largest difference at 68.56%, Democrats were only slightly lower at 68.47%. Interestingly, the turnout percentage difference for both parties exceeded 60% in the four presidential elections from 2000 to 2012. The difference was also over 60% for Republicans in 2016, but for Democrats it was 57.39% due to a combination of higher primary turnout and lower general election turnout.

The second difference to notice about the primary and general election lines is that the primary lines do not consistently follow each other the way the general election lines do. With slight exceptions for turnout in the 2010 and 2014 elections, the general election lines for the two parties are nearly parallel to each other. In contrast, the primary election lines for the parties have quite different patterns, both from each other and from the general election lines. The Republican primary turnout line is almost a mirror image of the general election line except for turnout in 2006 and 2018. Except for those years, Republican primary turnout was down in presidential years and up in midterm years. In 2006, Republican primary turnout was actually slightly lower than in either 2004 or 2008. In 2018, Republican primary turnout was nearly equal to the turnout in 2016. The Democrats' primary turnout line is somewhat a mirror image of the general election line in that there is a slight rise for 2002 and peak for 2006, but the 2010 primary turnout is actually lower than for 2008 and there is only a minimal rise in turnout for 2014. It is not until 2018 that we again see a substantial increase in midterm turnout for Democrats.

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<sup>8</sup> 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.

The primary lines for Democrats and Republicans are also dissimilar, but largely due to differences in midterm years. The turnout percentages of both Democrats and Republicans tend to be down in presidential years.<sup>9</sup> Republicans' turnout was up substantially in 2002, but that of Democrats only rose slightly, creating a large difference in turnout between the two parties. For 2006 and 2010 we see Democrats and Republicans reacting differently in their primary turnout. In 2006, Democrats' turnout was up substantially while that of Republicans was flat. The opposite was the case in 2010. The turnout for both Democrats and Republicans was up for 2014; only slightly for Democrats and less than usual for Republicans. In 2016 the turnout percentage for Republicans dropped to about what we would expect for a presidential year. In contrast, 2016 saw an increase in the turnout percentage for Democrats to a level higher than any other presidential year and even slightly higher than the Republicans' turnout percentage for the first time since 2008. After two midterm primaries with little increase, in 2018 Democrats' turnout rose to 29.55%, the highest level of the period. In contrast, Republican turnout in 2018 was only 0.10% above the 2016 turnout. Interestingly, both parties had substantial increases in primary turnout for 2020. For Democrats it was their highest percentage of the 11 elections. For Republicans, it was the highest percentage in a presidential year and third overall.

A third difference related to the second is that unlike general election turnout, where Republicans always had a higher turnout percentage, Democrats had a higher turnout percentage in the 2006, 2008, 2016, 2018, and 2020 primaries.

With the possible exception of 2010, and to a lesser extent 2014, it does not appear from the lines in Figure 1 that primary turnout is much of an indicator of later turnout in the general election. Rather, and not surprisingly, primary turnout is more likely a function of the particular races being contested in the primaries. I now turn to a discussion of the primaries each year.

## **Primaries 2000 to 2020**

In addition to primary contests for state-wide races (mainly gubernatorial and US Senate), competitive primaries in the Congressional Districts for US House seats can also affect turnout for one or both parties. During the period under examination Iowa has held its primaries with three different configurations of its Congressional Districts. The 2000 election was held under the redistricting plan first adopted for the 1992 elections. A new redistricting plan was adopted for the 2002 election and used through 2010. Following the 2010 census Iowa lost one of its Congressional Districts, going from five to four, and the plan adopted for the 2012 election reflected that change as well as

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<sup>9</sup> It may seem odd that primary turnout is so low for both parties in presidential election years, but because of the Iowa Caucuses presidential candidates are not on Iowa's primary ballot.

population changes within the state. To aid in the discussions below an Appendix following the figures presents each of the three Congressional District maps used.

Because three different configurations were used for the 11 primaries we cannot simply look at the turnout for a particular district over the period. Rather, Figures 2 through 12 show the turnout percentages for each primary for Democrats and Republicans in each of Iowa's Congressional Districts. Discussion of each figure will then focus on a combination of state-wide and district races in that year.

Before proceeding to the individual primaries it is worth noting again that presidential candidates are not on the Iowa primary ballot. All the major state-wide offices (Governor, Secretary of State, etc.) are on the midterm ballot. Thus, the only state-wide races on the primary ballot in presidential years are when there is a US Senate race. This helps to explain the lower primary turnout in presidential years and the usually higher turnout in midterm years.

### **Presidential Year Primary of 2000**

Figure 2 shows the primary turnout percentages for Democrats and Republicans in 2000.<sup>10</sup> For comparison purposes, the first pair of columns shows the state-wide turnout percentages for that primary. The remaining pairs show the turnout percentages for each of Iowa's Congressional Districts. One note of caution here is that because of the way the data were reported over the entire period, particularly for undervotes, the state turnout percentages are not simply averages of the shown district averages.

Given that there was no Senate race in Iowa in 2000 it is not surprising that the state turnout percentages for both parties were fairly low. In terms of the US House races, Republican incumbents were running in IA01 (the shorthand for Iowa's 1st Congressional District), IA02, IA04, and IA05. An incumbent Democrat was running in IA03. Brief descriptions of each district are as follows:

IA01: The lowest turnout for both parties was in IA01. Although there was a contested primary for Democrats in IA01, there was little enthusiasm that either would beat long term Republican incumbent Jim Leach and this district had the lowest turnout for Democrats of the five. This district also had the lowest turnout for Republicans in this year. Although voters will often come out to support their candidate even when he or she is unopposed in a nomination race, that did not seem to be the case here.

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<sup>10</sup> Note that the vertical axes for Figures 2 through 12 do not have the same scale. The variation in scales allows for better representation of the district differences when the turnout is low.

- IA02: Democrats had their second lowest turnout in this district, but Republicans had their highest. It appears Republicans were willing to come out to support their incumbent Jim Nussle. There was only one Democrat running to challenge Nussle, so it is not surprising that turnout for Democrats was not higher.
- IA03: Republicans had a closely contested race, which also kept their turnout relatively high in the district. Turnout for Democrats was highest in this district and coming out to vote for incumbent Leonard Boswell may have been a factor.
- IA04: The turnout percentage for the two parties was most even in this district; second highest for Democrats, second lowest for Republicans. A single Democrat ran for the nomination to challenge Republican incumbent Dr. Greg Ganske.
- IA05: This district encompassed the northwest portion of Iowa, which is usually considered the most conservative part of the state. Thus, it is not surprising that Republicans would come out to support their incumbent Representative, Tom Latham. For Democrats, although they had a closely contested primary, the likelihood of the nominee winning in the general election may have dampened turnout.

### **Midterm Year Primary of 2002**

Figure 3 shows the primary turnout percentages for the midterm year of 2002. Although turnout is usually up in midterm primary years, it was only slightly so (2.08%) for Democrats at the state-wide level in 2002. In contrast, Republican turnout state-wide was up 16.64% from 2000. The small increase for Democrats and much larger one for Republicans are likely due to the gubernatorial and US Senate races that year. Democrats had incumbents running in both races: Tom Vilsack for Governor and Tom Harkin for Senate. The race for the Republican gubernatorial nominee was hard fought among three candidates. The race for the Republican Senate nominee was also contested. Sitting Representative Dr. Greg Ganske opted for a Senate run rather than running for reelection in his reconfigured House seat. He was a much stronger candidate than his opponent in the primary, so the focus for Republicans was on the gubernatorial race.

The reconfiguration of Iowa's Congressional Districts (see the second map in the Appendix) caused three of Iowa's Representatives to move so they could continue to represent the bulk of their former Districts. Republican Jim Leach moved from Scott County to Johnson County so he could continue to represent many of the counties in the new IA02. Democrat Leonard Boswell moved to Polk County (home of Des Moines, Iowa's largest city) to continue to represent the new IA03. Republican Tom Latham moved to Story County to continue to represent most of the old IA05 counties that were part of the new IA04. That Jim Leach moved to the new IA02 prevented an incumbent

versus incumbent nomination fight in the new IA01, which still included Republican Jim Nussle's home. The Senate run by Ganske and move by Latham created an open seat in the new IA05.

IA01: Democrats had their best turnout in the IA01 primary. Two of the three candidates were fairly strong, including former US Representative, Dave Nagle, who had represented part of the new IA01 from 1987 to 1993. Interestingly, Nagle lost the primary rather handily though the race seemed to boost turnout. For Republicans in IA01, beyond the gubernatorial and Senate nomination races it would have been mostly a matter of coming out to support their incumbent (even though he had not represented the entire new district before).

IA02: Republicans in IA02 faced the same basic situation as in IA01 in that they were also voting for an incumbent Representative aside from the state-wide races. Republican turnout was the lowest in this district, though still well above that of Democrats. There was only a single candidate running to be the Democrats' nominee for the IA02 House race, Dr. Julie Thomas. She was a strong candidate, but as she was unopposed it did little to boost Democrats' turnout in the district.

IA03: Democrats had their second best turnout here, likely as a way to support incumbent Representative Leonard Boswell. The Republicans' race in IA03 was not contested, so there did not seem to be an additional incentive for Republicans in the district to vote beyond the state-wide races.

IA04: The nomination race for Democrats in IA04 was uncontested, so it is no surprise the turnout here was middle of the road for this year. Republican turnout in IA04 was well above that in the first three districts. Part of the reason for the higher turnout may have been a desire to support incumbent Republican Tom Latham who was new to a large portion of the district. Another factor increasing turnout in IA04 was likely that one of the three gubernatorial candidates was from north central Iowa, which was now a major portion of IA04.

IA05: Republicans had their highest turnout in the new IA05. This was not surprising for at least two reasons. As in IA04, one of the gubernatorial candidates was from the northwest part of the state, which helped to boost interest and turnout. In addition, the open seat in a district where the Republican nominee was expected to win in the general election generated a lot of interest in a hotly contested and very close race. The race was so close that none of the four candidates received the required 35% of the vote to be declared the winner, so the decision went to convention where Steve King was chosen as the nominee.

## Presidential Year Primary of 2004

Figure 4 shows the state and district turnout for the 2004 primaries. As expected the turnout for both parties dropped for the primaries in this presidential election year. There was a Senate seat up in 2004, but the incumbent, Republican Chuck Grassley, was widely favored to win. Because of Grassley's popularity in the state only one Democrat was willing to run against him, former State Senator Art Small. There was apparently little enthusiasm for Small. In the primary, 76,183 Democrats voted, but Small received only 52,318 votes. As noted previously, it is not surprising to have a large number of undervotes in a race where a candidate is unopposed, but additional evidence of the lack of enthusiasm for Small can be found in the general election results where Small received almost 80,000 fewer votes than Democrats who voted.<sup>11</sup>

Notice that the 13.35% indicated for the Democrats' state-wide primary turnout is actually higher than that of any of the five districts. Again, the state figure is not simply an average of the district figures. Rather, the state figure is based on all those who turned out while the district figures are based on actual votes. Thus, undervotes in the US Senate or House races would give the appearance of a lower turnout in the districts than the state figure indicates.

The incumbent in each of Iowa's five Congressional Districts ran for reelection (and ultimately won in the general election). As usual, there were variations in the competitiveness of the nomination races for the challenging party.

IA01: Two Democrats ran to be their party's nominee to face incumbent Jim Nussle. The race was moderately competitive, but did not seem to generate a great deal of enthusiasm.

IA02: Although this district had the highest voter registration advantage for Democrats, and was long seen as the most liberal district, it seemed unlikely that moderate incumbent Republican Jim Leach would be defeated. Democrats in the district seemed to alternate between putting up a strong candidate one election with a weak candidate the next. After the strong opponent Leach faced in 2002, a much weaker candidate, Dave Franker, ran unopposed to face him in 2004. Even so, Franker was on the school board of the largest city in one of the two biggest counties in the district and that seemed to generate enough interest for Democrats to have their highest turnout of the five districts.

IA03: This district was the only one with an incumbent Democrat, Leonard Boswell. Although party voters sometimes turn out to support their party's incumbent — and had seemingly done so in the past for Boswell — that was apparently not the case this year as the turnout for Democrats was the lowest in this district. We

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<sup>11</sup> See the eighth paper in the series for more details.

can see, however, that turnout for Republicans was even worse. The Republican challenger, Stan Thompson, ran unopposed. Thompson was the same challenger Boswell faced, and defeated, in 2002.

IA04: Turnout for Democrats was the second lowest in this district. Only one Democrat ran to face Republican incumbent Tom Latham. Although Latham had a relatively competitive general election race in 2002 in the newly configured IA04, it seemed that Democrats did not feel they had a solid chance to defeat him. On the other hand, turnout for Republicans in the district was not very good either.

IA05: This district was the one with the largest voter registration advantage for Republicans. It seemed unlikely that a Democrat would win this district, but three sought the nomination to try. This likely helped to boost turnout for Democrats. The high turnout for Republicans in this district may be partly due to a desire to support, Steve King, the newest of Iowa's incumbent Representatives. King may have also been working hard to solidify his support in the district given that he won the nomination for the 2002 race by convention rather than in the primary.

### **Midterm Year Primary of 2006**

From Figure 1 it was clear that the turnout in 2006 was unusual. Republican turnout is usually higher in midterm years, but was actually at its lowest in 2006. Turnout for Democrats is not usually much higher (if at all) in midterm years, but was up substantially in 2006 to its highest of the period. We can see from Figure 5 that these unusual turnout changes are reflected across Iowa's districts.

There was no Senate race in Iowa in 2006. The state-wide focus was on an open gubernatorial election. Sitting Governor Tom Vilsack decided not to run for reelection. This resulted in a hotly contested primary among three candidates (and a fourth also-ran) to be the Democrats' nominee. On the Republican side, it first appeared that the primary would be contested when sitting Representative Jim Nussle and former gubernatorial candidate Bob Vander Plaats both declared for the race. To avoid the kind of primary fight that hurt Republicans in 2002, Vander Plaats agreed to run as Nussle's Lieutenant Governor running mate. That left Nussle as the only candidate running for the Republican nomination.

IA01: The high turnout for Democrats in IA01 was no surprise due to the gubernatorial race. In addition, however, the move by Republican Nussle to seek the Governor's office meant this was an open congressional seat and four Democrats entered the nomination race, which was won by trial lawyer Bruce Braley who went on to win the general election. Given the incentive of an open seat and a competitive primary it is almost a bit surprising that turnout for Democrats was

not even higher in this district. On the other hand, Republicans had their highest turnout in this district. The close race between three Republicans for the House nomination generated a lot of interest in a year that generally seemed bad for Republicans.

IA02: Republicans in IA02 had not shown much of an inclination to turn out in support of incumbent Jim Leach in primaries and that continued for 2006. Interestingly, however, the high turnout in this district for Democrats was not related to any candidates running against Leach because no one was, at least not at the time of the primary. Despite the general feeling early on that 2006 would be a good year for Democrats, no Democrat declared for the nomination to run against Leach in time to get on the ballot. By the time of the primary it was known that college professor Dave Loeb sack planned to run so he received 501 write-in votes (of 936 cast). Loeb sack was later officially nominated at convention. It seems that the high turnout for Democrats in IA02 was the result of the gubernatorial nomination race. The results show that two of the three counties that cast more than 10,000 votes in the Democrats' primary, Johnson and Linn, are in this district and Culver, the eventual nominee, lost in both.

IA03: This district had unopposed nomination races for both parties. For the Democrats it was incumbent Leonard Boswell. For the Republicans it was a challenger by the name of Jeff Lamberti. Turnout for Republicans was the lowest in this district and for Democrats was the highest. Although Democrats seemed willing to turn out in support of Boswell in some previous primaries, it is more likely the Democrats' gubernatorial nomination race was driving the higher turnout. As in IA02, the gubernatorial nomination race was very competitive in the district's (and state's) most populous county, Polk, and Culver lost here as well.

IA04: There were another two unopposed races in this district. Republican turnout was a bit higher in IA04 than IA02 or IA03, suggesting more enthusiasm in supporting the incumbent, Tom Latham. Turnout for Democrats was down slightly from the IA03 turnout, but still second-highest of the five despite an unopposed candidate for the Congressional seat. As in IA02 and IA03, it seems that the Democrats' gubernatorial nomination race drove turnout here. Although no one or two counties dominated IA04 as Johnson and Linn did in IA02, and Polk did for IA03, Story county had the largest number of Democrats turn out and Culver ended up in third place (as he did in Johnson County).

IA05: Here again we are apparently seeing enthusiasm among Republicans for turning out to support their incumbent, Steve King. On the other hand, this was the district where Democrats had their lowest turnout. This was despite the fact that Democrats had a contested primary. Even to the extent that Democrats in this

district had little hope of unseating King – even in a good year for Democrats – we might have expected higher turnout due to the Democrats’ gubernatorial nomination race. In that regard, the two most populous counties in the district, Pottawattamie and Woodbury had turnout percentages for the Democrats well below that of the district as a whole.

### **Presidential Year Primary of 2008**

Turnout for the two parties in 2008 was largely as expected for a presidential year. The difference was that Democrats had a slightly higher turnout percentage than Republicans, which was the first time this occurred in a presidential year during the period. Figure 6 shows the 2008 turnout across the districts.

There was a Senate race in Iowa in 2008. Long-time incumbent Democrat Tom Harkin was running for reelection. Three Republicans entered the race for the nomination to face Harkin. Although the race turned out to be close, all the candidates were fairly weak with little chance of beating Harkin, particularly in a year that seemed to heavily favor Democrats.

One odd thing that may have dampened (no pun intended) turnout somewhat in 2008 was the flooding that affected major portions of the state. Although the worst part of the flooding occurred later in the summer, several campaigns scaled back their efforts as it would be inappropriate to be campaigning while so many were suffering flooding. This also gave incumbents higher visibility helping communities despite the scaled back official campaign activities.

Once again, an incumbent was running in each of Iowa’s five Congressional Districts, but with a twist in one of them.

IA01: Incumbent Democrat Bruce Braley was running for reelection in this district. His opponent ran unopposed in the Republican primary. The unopposed primaries did not generate much interest and both parties had their lowest turnout in this district.

IA02: The defeat of former Republican Representative Jim Leach in 2006 meant Republicans had an opportunity for a new nominee for the first time in many years. Two Republicans entered what turned out to be a close nomination race to face first term incumbent Democrat Dave Loebsack. Although one of the two candidates was from the largest county in the district, the primary winner was Dr. Mariannette Miller-Meeks, a physician and veteran. As a result of the competitive race, Republicans had their highest turnout in this district. Turnout for Democrats was higher than it had been in the 2000 to 2004 primaries, possibly in support of finally having an incumbent, particularly given that Loebsack had initially been chosen at a convention rather than a primary.

IA03: A single candidate ran for the Republican nomination in this district, so it is little surprise turnout was not higher. The surprise, and the twist mentioned above, was that incumbent Democrat Leonard Boswell received a strong primary challenge from Ed Fallon, who had been a gubernatorial candidate in 2006. Among other differences, Boswell voted in favor of the Iraq war resolution and Fallon made this a key issue in the race. Although Boswell still won fairly easily, it did drive up turnout among Democrats in the district.

IA04: Republican turnout for incumbent Tom Latham was unremarkable, though higher than it had been in the prior presidential year of 2004. Four candidates entered the Democrats' nomination race to face Latham. Although, Becky Greenwald easily won the nomination, she did so with less than 50% of the vote. Even so, the race seemed to generate enough interest to increase Democrats' turnout to the second highest of the districts this year.

IA05: Once again, primary turnout among Republicans in this district was very good for a presidential year as they came out to support incumbent Steve King. Only a single Democrat entered the race to face King, so it is not surprising turnout was at the lower end for Democrats.

### **Midterm Year Primary of 2010**

Independent of events in Iowa it seemed early on that 2010 would be a good year for Republicans. In Iowa, the incumbent Governor, Democrat Chet Culver, seemed vulnerable for his handling of the financial crisis as it affected Iowa. Former long-time Governor Terry Branstad, who had chosen to not seek reelection in 1998, came out of political retirement to seek the Governor's office again. He was challenged in the race by Bob Vander Plaats who had unsuccessfully sought the nomination in 2002 and 2006. Although Branstad easily defeated Vander Plaats, the effort put into the race generated lot of interest by Republicans. In addition to the gubernatorial race, Iowa also had a Senate race in 2010. Long-time incumbent Republican Chuck Grassley was again running for reelection. Although defeating Grassley seemed unlikely, particularly in a year that seemed to favor Republicans, three Democrats entered the race for their party's nomination. The race was dominated by well-known lawyer Roxanne Conlin, so it did not seem to generate as much interest as a closer race might have.

Figure 7 shows the 2010 turnout across the districts. The difference in turnout between Democrats and Republicans is remarkable: Republican turnout was over three times higher than that of Democrats in all five of Iowa's districts. It is also interesting how consistent the high turnout of Republicans and low turnout of Democrats was across the districts.

Once again, incumbents were running for reelection in all five of Iowa's districts.

- IA01: There did not seem to be much of an inclination in this district to turn out to support incumbent Democrat Bruce Braley. On the Republican side, four candidates sought the nomination. Although the race seemed hard fought, Ben Lange easily won, though with less than 50% of the vote. Although Republican turnout in IA01 was high, it was still lower than any of the other districts.
- IA02: Unlike 2008, Democrats did not seem inclined to turn out to support their incumbent Representative, Dave Loebsack. There was a four-way race for the Republican nomination. Two of the candidates had run for the Republican Senate nomination in 2008, including the eventual nominee (and general election loser). Mariannette Miller-Meeks was the easy winner, though with less than 50% of the vote. She had been the Republican nominee facing Loebsack in 2008 and was looking to do well in a year favoring Republicans.
- IA03: Although turnout for Democrats was slightly higher in this district compared to IA01 and IA02, it still seemed that there was little interest in turning out to support incumbent Leonard Boswell, who did not have a primary challenger this time. The IA03 nomination race for the Republicans was the race that generated a lot of interest. Given the general feeling that it would be a good year for Republicans, and that Boswell was vulnerable, seven candidates entered the Republican nomination race. Four of the candidates were essentially also-rans, but there was a close and hotly contested race between the other three. The race also generated interest to see whether the winner would receive at least 35% of the primary vote to avoid the contest going to a convention. The eventual winner, sitting State Senator Brad Zaun, did surpass the 35% threshold. He did so by winning nearly half the votes in Polk County, his home county and Iowa's most populous. This helped to push Republican turnout in the district to the highest of the five districts this year.
- IA04: Here the incumbent was Republican Tom Latham. In prior elections Republicans in the district seemed to show moderate enthusiasm for turnout in the primary to support their candidate, so the high turnout here is likely generated primarily by the gubernatorial nomination race. Although turnout for Democrats was still low in this district it was the highest of the five. This is a little surprising given that only one candidate entered the race to face Latham. There were just shy of 26% undervotes the Democrats' nomination race for the Congressional seat, so many of the Democrats turning out were doing so for other races.
- IA05: Republicans in this district have shown a willingness to turn out to support their incumbent, Steve King. That still seemed to be the case in 2010 even though the turnout percentage was slightly below those of IA03 and IA04. Two candidates entered the race to for the Democrats' nomination. Although Matthew Campbell

was the easy winner, the race did not seem to generate much enthusiasm as undervotes accounted for nearly 18% of the total turnout number.

### **Presidential Year Primary of 2012**

Following their electoral successes of 2010, nationally and in Iowa, Republicans were enthusiastic they could unseat President Obama. As a result, although there was no Senate race in Iowa in 2012 Republican primary turnout did not fall as much as one would expect in a presidential year. Democrats, on the other hand, seemed rather glum about their electoral prospects given the state of the economy and Obama's weaker poll numbers. Nevertheless, Obama's campaign was well aware of the difficulties they faced and worked hard to offset them. The effort was largely successful in the general election if not in the primary. Democrats' primary turnout in 2010 was down below where we might have expected it in presidential years. In 2012 it fell even further, drifting below 10%.

Figure 8 shows the turnout among the districts. As expected given the turnout percentages shown in Figure 1, Republican turnout was up across the districts for a presidential year and turnout for Democrats was down.

Figure 8 also shows that there were now only four Congressional Districts in Iowa. The 2012 elections were the first held under the new redistricting plan in which Iowa went from five to four Congressional Districts. (See the third map in the Appendix.) Iowa's redistricting process is non-partisan and by law cannot take into consideration the political affiliations of any officeholders.<sup>12</sup> The proposed plan created two intra-party, incumbent versus incumbent conflicts. Both Bruce Braley and Dave Loebsack were initially placed in the new IA01. Loebsack quickly solved the conflict by moving 30 miles south from Linn County to Johnson County. The second conflict had Tom Latham and Steve King in the new IA04. This conflict was a little more difficult to resolve, but eventually Latham decided to move to the new IA03 to challenge incumbent Democrat Leonard Boswell. Oddly enough, Latham had previously represented more counties in the new IA03 than Boswell had.

IA01: Two Republicans entered the race to face incumbent Democrat Bruce Braley. The eventual winner was Ben Lange, who had lost to Braley in the 2010 general election. The Republican primary was fairly close, and although turnout was higher than in prior presidential years (though keep in mind this was a new district from the previous five primaries), it was still the lowest of the four districts.

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<sup>12</sup> I discuss Iowa's redistricting process in more detail in Chapter 17 of *The Political Battle Over Congressional Redistricting* edited by William J. Miller and Jeremy D. Walling, Lexington Books, 2013.

- IA02: Two Republicans also entered the race to face incumbent Democrat Dave Loeb sack. The race for the Republican nomination was relatively close and generated a good amount of interest in the district. The winner was John Archer, an attorney for farm equipment manufacturer Deere and Company. Interestingly, turnout was also up for Democrats in IA02 even though Loeb sack did not face a primary challenge. This may have been an instance of Democrats coming out to support their incumbent in the new district.
- IA03: As noted above, the race was between two incumbents, Democrat Leonard Boswell and Republican Tom Latham. Neither faced a primary opponent. Democrats did not seem to turn out to support Boswell in the primary as the turnout percentage was the lowest of the four districts. Republican turnout in IA03 was the second lowest of the four districts, though still over three times the turnout for Democrats.
- IA04: The race in IA04 was interesting, but not so much because of the primary. Although Republican incumbent Steve King was running in a newly configured district, it was still the district with the greatest voter registration advantage for Republicans. Early in the election cycle former Iowa First Lady Christie Vilsack indicated a desire to seek elective office. She might have gotten the Democrats' nomination and won the general election had she chosen to run in IA01 or IA02, and maybe even IA03. She was discouraged from doing so by national party officials and that left IA04 as her only option. She ran unopposed and the high profile nature of the race even before the primary seemed to energize Republicans more than Democrats. Turnout of Democrats was also up in this district, but the difference in turnout between the parties was the greatest in this district.

### **Midterm Year Primary of 2014**

There were exceptions for both parties for prior midterm year primaries, but we might have expected the turnout for both parties to be higher than they ended up being in 2014. In the gubernatorial race, incumbent Republican Terry Branstad actually had token opposition. Although the challenger had little hope of defeating him, Branstad took the opposition as an opportunity to fine tune his campaign. This likely helped turnout in the state. There were initially two candidates in the Democrats' gubernatorial nomination race, but one dropped out well before the primary and the remaining candidate, State Senator Jack Hatch, did not seem to generate the enthusiasm necessary to increase turnout in the primary.

Iowa also had a Senate race in 2014. This was the more interesting race as long-time Senator Harkin chose to retire, creating the first open Senate seat in Iowa in 40 years. Representative Bruce Braley had long been thought to be the eventual successor to Harkin and he quickly declared for the Democrats' nomination. That cleared the field

and he ran unopposed in the primary. The Republican response was interesting as there seemed to be hesitation to enter the race. Many were waiting to see what Representative Steve King was going to do. Had he entered the race he may not have faced opposition. Representative Tom Latham also declined to enter the race and later decided to retire as well. Lieutenant Governor Kim Reynolds also chose not to switch from her reelection race to the Senate race. Those were seen as the most high profile Republicans – the “A listers” as described in some press reports. That left the field open for lesser-known Republicans to enter the race and six did. One dropped out prior to the primary and the race was really between four of the five who each seemed to appeal to different portions of the Republican base. One candidate, former energy company executive Mark Jacobs, was able to self-fund his campaign and he seemed to be the early front runner. Even so, Jacobs did not seem to generate a lot of enthusiasm on the part of the Republican base and the race seemed somewhat sleepy. A few weeks prior to the primary State Senator Joni Ernst started gaining ground and came out with an ad that generated a lot of attention for her. Until then it seemed that none of the candidates would get the required 35% to avoid the decision going to convention, but Ernst surged to a 56% victory to gain the nomination.

We might have expected Republican turnout to be higher given the initial closeness of the Senate nomination race. One factor that might have dampened Republican turnout was that Braley seemed to be a very formidable candidate relative to the much lesser-known field of Republicans. Democrats’ turnout was never that high even in midterm primaries with the exception of 2006 and the unopposed gubernatorial and Senate races did not change that.

Figure 9 shows the turnout percentages in the districts.

IA01: Incumbent Representative Bruce Braley’s decision to enter the Senate race left this seat open. Five Democrats entered the race for their party’s nomination. Sitting State Representative Pat Murphy seemed to take an early lead. Despite Murphy’s frontrunner status his opponents were credible and there was some question whether he would surpass the 35% threshold. He did by a few percentage points and the closeness of the race certainly drove up turnout in IA01. Without the higher turnout in this district Democrats’ statewide turnout would have been slightly below 10% based on the other three districts. Three candidates entered the race for the Republicans. One was basically an also-ran. Another had unsuccessfully sought prior nominations at Senate and House level. The eventual winner, Rod Blum, was a successful businessman who had unsuccessfully sought the nomination for IA01 in 2012. The Republican race did not seem to generate additional interest to drive up turnout.

IA02: Although turnout for Democrats was lower in IA02 than IA01, it was still higher than IA03 and IA04. This may have been an indication of support for incumbent

Dave Loeb sack. Two Republicans entered the race for their party's nomination. The winner, Dr. Mariannette Miller-Meeks had been the nominee twice before in 2008 and 2010. Having spent time since 2010 as the state Director of Public Health, Miller-Meeks was a more experienced candidate with an enhanced résumé and voters evidently agreed that the third time might be the charm for her. Even so, this district had the lowest Republican turnout of the four.

IA03: The races for both parties were interesting in IA03. Early on, former State Senator Staci Appel declared for the Democrats' nomination race. No other Democrats seemed interested in taking on incumbent Republican Tom Latham. When Latham later announced that he was not seeking reelection, no other Democrat entered the race despite the lure of an open seat. That seemed to lower Democrats' interest in turning out for the primary and this district had their lowest turnout. For Republicans, one very weak candidate initially declared to run against Latham. When Latham decided to not run for reelection several candidates entered the nomination race, including David Young, who had previously been in the Senate nomination race but had been struggling. Another candidate was sitting State Senator Brad Zaun who had been the nominee challenging then-incumbent Boswell in 2010. Although Zaun was not the best funded candidate he was seen by some as the frontrunner. The question was whether he would get the required 35% to avoid the nomination going to convention. He did not and a special convention was called in IA03 for the delegates (who had been selected at the county conventions earlier in the year). Beginning with the second round of voting the candidate with the lowest vote total was dropped and the process continued until a candidate received over 50% of the vote. As it turned out, David Young eventually won the nomination even though he had come in fifth in the primary. Regardless of the convention outcome, the closeness of the Republican primary contest certainly helped to increase turnout in the district.

IA04: As in IA03, the Democrats' candidate, Jim Mowrer, ran unopposed in the primary. Even so, as an Iraq War veteran who had served with Vice President Biden's son Beau at Camp Victory, Mowrer had connections and endorsements that allowed him to do very well in early fundraising. This generated a bit more interest in the primary despite the lack of opposition. The Republican candidate was again incumbent Steve King. Although he lagged behind Mowrer in fundraising, that did not seem to dampen enthusiasm for him among the Republican base. Interestingly, this was the only Republican primary race with an unopposed candidate, and only incumbent, and it had the highest turnout of the four.

## Presidential Year Primary of 2016

Figure 10 shows the primary turnout for 2016. As noted previously, primary turnout tends to be down in presidential years. That ended up being true for Republicans but not as much as we might have anticipated due to an unexpected primary race in IA04. As for the Democrats, their turnout actually increased from that of 2014. In fact, the primary turnout for Democrats in 2016 was the highest in a presidential year since at least 2000. Contested primaries in IA01 and IA03 as well as for a US Senate nomination largely accounted for this increase.

Iowa's long-time Republican Senator Chuck Grassley was up for reelection in 2016. This normally would not generate much enthusiasm on the part of Democrats as Iowa likes its incumbents and Grassley is usually considered very popular. As noted above, Grassley handily won his prior reelection contests in 2004 and 2010. Nevertheless, outside events put more of a spotlight on the Senate race and increased interest in challenging Grassley. Specifically, when the US Senate refused to act to fill the vacancy created by the death of US Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, Grassley, as Chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee, came under pressure. Given that Grassley was up for reelection, Democrats appeared to believe that it was worth putting additional pressure on him to act on Obama's nominee to replace Scalia. Prior to these events it appeared that the Democrats' nomination race would be a rather sleepy affair. Two former state legislators, both of whom had sought the Democrats' Senate nomination in 2010, and lost badly, and a current State Senator, Robert Hogg, were in the race but not getting much attention. When the Supreme Court vacancy made some believe that Grassley would be more vulnerable this cycle there was an effort to recruit a stronger candidate. It appeared that national Democrats recruited Patty Judge, a former Iowa Secretary of Agriculture and Lieutenant Governor, to challenge Grassley.

Some Iowa Democrats did not appreciate what appeared to be interference by national Democrats in the Iowa race. Others did not like Judge because they saw her as too conservative on some environmental issues. On the other hand, Judge had more state-wide name recognition than the others who were running and as a woman would be able to tap into the "woman's card" that Hillary Clinton was playing in the presidential race. When Judge entered the race some assumed right away that she would win the nomination and give Grassley more of a challenge than he had faced in the past. The other Democrats seeking the nomination did not see it this way and continued to fight for the nomination. Although the two former state legislators made a lot of noise in the race, they failed to get much traction. The race mainly came down to Hogg and Judge.

Although Judge had much greater name recognition, Hogg worked much harder as a candidate. In fact, some of the criticism of Judge focused on the low key approach she took to the campaign, almost as if she just assumed she would get the nomination. Some Democrats also liked Hogg's environmental positions better, and he had even written a book on climate change. Another factor in Hogg's favor was that he was

much younger than Judge (and Grassley) and could have made more of a generational argument that it was time for Grassley to step aside. Hogg ended up winning some of Iowa's larger counties such as Johnson and Linn, but Judge won the nomination (though with less than 50% of the vote). The competitiveness of this race helped to increase turnout overall for Democrats.

IA01: It was no surprise that turnout was down for Republicans in this district. In 2014 they had a competitive primary for an open congressional seat but in 2016 they had an incumbent seeking reelection. The Democrats also had a competitive primary in 2014. In 2016 two of the five who ran in 2014 did so again, including the 2014 nominee, former state legislator Pat Murphy. Some thought there were stronger candidates in 2014 than Murphy, but the other four candidates split the vote and Murphy managed to win the nomination. In 2016 he faced one of those stronger challengers, Monica Vernon, and ended up losing rather convincingly to her. Even so, two factors seemed to contribute to the higher turnout. The first was that incumbent Rod Blum was seen by national Democrats as one of the most vulnerable House Republicans. The second was that the focus on two candidates rather than five seemed to sharpen the race. These two factors, along with the competitive Senate nomination race, pushed Democrats' turnout in this district above what it had been in 2014.

IA02: The turnout for both parties was somewhat middle of the road in this district. On the Republican side the only candidate, Dr. Chris Peters, declared late so there was not a lot of time to generate turnout in the primary to support him. For the Democrats, incumbent Dave Loebsack did not have a challenger. Although this might have depressed turnout, Democrats actually had a higher turnout in the district than Republicans for the first time since the last redistricting. The explanation for the better than expected turnout was likely the contested Senate race. Although Johnson County is second to Scott County in population in IA02, the Democrats' turnout in 2016 was nearly twice as much and Hogg ran very strong there, winning over 50% of the vote.

IA03: Like IA01, this district had a freshman Republican incumbent who was seen as vulnerable by Democrats. Three Democrats entered the nomination race. One of the three was Jim Mowrer, who had been the Democrats' 2014 nominee in IA04. Mowrer lost easily in that general election, but Democrats still saw him as having a future in the party. After the 2014 election he moved to Des Moines in IA03 and was seen as the frontrunner when he entered the 2016 nomination race. He got a strong challenge from another candidate but ended up winning, though with less than 50% of the vote. Along with the contested Senate race this drove up turnout for Democrats in this district well above what it had been in the previous two primaries. On the Republican side, freshman incumbent David Young had won the nomination in 2014 by convention given that none of the

candidates in the primary had received the required 35% of the vote. We might have expected more Republicans to come out to support him as a new incumbent, but the turnout was still respectable even if well below what it had been in the previous two primaries.

IA04: This was the only district of the four in which Republican turnout was higher than that of Democrats, and substantially so. As in 2014, only one Democrat, Kim Weaver, entered the nomination race. Although Democrats in IA02 turned out fairly well despite not having a contested primary, that was not the case in this district. That said, although the Democrats' turnout in IA04 was the lowest of the four districts, it was still higher than it had been in the previous two primaries. For the Republicans, we had seen in previous primaries that GOP voters were willing to come out to support the incumbent Steven King. Unlike previous contests, in 2016 King faced a primary challenger. King was often seen as a thorn in the side of Democrats, and sometimes Republicans as well. Rick Bertrand decided to challenge King and was supported by some Republicans in the state that had had enough of King. That kept turnout at about the same levels for Republicans as the previous two primaries. Although King won handily with about two-thirds of the vote, it might be a bit worrisome to him that a third of the Republicans in the district were willing to vote for someone else.

### **Midterm Year Primary of 2018**

In Figure 1 we saw that primary turnout in 2018 was much like it was in 2006 in that Democrats' turnout was up substantially while that of Republicans was essentially flat compared to 2016. Part of the reason for this was that Democrats angry over Hillary Clinton's defeat by Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election kept their energy up and focused on an attempt to retake Congressional control. Part of this effort focused on doing a better job of fielding more and higher quality candidates.

The key state-wide office in 2018 was the gubernatorial race. On the Republican side, when Governor Terry Branstad won reelection in 2014 there was some speculation that it would be his last race. Along with Lieutenant Governor Kim Reynolds, other possible top contenders were Iowa's Secretary of Agriculture Bill Northey, and IA04 Representative Steve King. The assumption was that if Branstad did not run for reelection that it could be a tough primary fight. As it turned out, Branstad was nominated to be the US Ambassador to China and resigned in May 2017. That elevated Reynolds to the governor's office. Although that did not initially stop talk of a contested primary, when Northey announced that he would not run against Reynolds it effectively shut down the possibility of a strongly contested primary.

One wrinkle for Reynolds was that Cedar Rapids Mayor Ron Corbett who had indicated an intention to run for governor decided not to drop out of the race. Corbett was not getting a lot of attention and most of what he got after Reynolds became

governor was negative as most Republicans felt that they had their nominee. As it turned out, Corbett failed to get enough signatures on the qualifying petitions so was not on the ballot for the primary allowing Reynolds to run unopposed.

In addition to Reynolds, Republicans had incumbents running for Secretary of State and the Auditor of State. Because there were longtime and popular incumbent Democrats running for Treasurer of State and state Attorney General Republicans did not field a primary candidate for either office. Republicans did have a contested race for state Secretary of Agriculture with five candidates running. Even so, the favorite seemed to be Mike Naig, who became the acting Secretary of Agriculture when Bill Northey resigned to take a position in the US Department of Agriculture. Naig had far more votes in the primary than his competitors but did not get the needed 35% to claim the nomination and had to be nominated at convention. Despite the competitive nature of the race, it did not seem to drive turnout given that a little over 15% of those who cast ballots did not vote in the Secretary of Agriculture race.

Iowans tend to like their incumbents, which makes them hard to beat. That is one reason why some longtime incumbents tended to get only token opposition in general elections. Not surprisingly, open seats often generate much more interest, which frequently results in more competition for party nominations.

Unlike Republicans, Democrats did not view Reynolds as an incumbent given that she had succeeded to the office rather than winning it on her own. Six candidates ended up on the ballot for the Democrats' gubernatorial nomination. The race appeared spirited and at least five of the candidates seemed to have a good base of support. Although businessman Fred Hubbell won with over 55% of the vote the race certainly drove turnout as Democrats were eager to select a candidate they believed could defeat Reynolds.

Given that Iowa had passed a new Voter ID law, Democrats were also eager to defeat Paul Pate, the incumbent Secretary of State. This resulted in a contested nomination race between two candidates that also got a fair amount of attention.<sup>13</sup>

Contested races in the Congressional Districts also helped to drive turnout for the Democrats as shown in Figure 11.

IA01: Incumbent Rod Blum was seen by Democrats as one of the country's most vulnerable Republican members of Congress. This district was targeted by Democrats in 2016, but Blum managed to win reelection. The district was targeted by Democrats again in 2018 and this produced four candidates who ran

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<sup>13</sup> It is hard to say whether this race drove turnout, however, given that almost 12% of those who turned out at the polls did not bother to vote in the Secretary of State race.

for the nomination. Abby Finkenauer, a Representative in the Iowa House, won the nomination fairly easily, but the additional attention of the race likely helped to drive turnout as Democrats had their second best turnout in this district. In contrast, Republicans did not seem to be turning out to support their incumbent Blum as this district had the lowest turnout percentage of the four.

IA02: There have been variations as to whether Democrats in this district would come out to support their incumbent Dave Loeb sack. Turnout for Democrats in this district was the third highest of the four, but only slightly behind the turnout percentage of IA01. The gubernatorial nomination race was likely the primary driver of the increased turnout in this district. On the Republican side, Dr. Christopher Peters, a surgeon and veteran, was running for the nomination for a second time. He got the nomination in 2016 at convention rather than in a primary. In 2018 there was a second person who announced her candidacy, but she failed to qualify for the ballot and ran an unsuccessful write-in campaign. This race might have generated a bit of turnout for Republicans as the turnout in this district was the second highest of the four districts and above the state average.

IA03: On the Republican side, the turnout in this district was the second lowest of the four. Republican turnout was up a little compared to 2016, but it did not seem that Republicans were turning out to support their incumbent. For Democrats, this district had the highest turnout of the four and by a pretty good margin. Like IA01, the Republican incumbent seemed vulnerable and the district was targeted by Democrats. Three candidates ran in the primary for Democrats. Given that this district contains Des Moines the race got a lot of attention. Even so, political newcomer Cindy Axne won the nomination fairly easily. Part of what might have helped drive turnout for Democrats in the district was a sharp increase in their voter registrations. Between the general elections of 2016 and 2018 the voter registrations in the district went from favoring the Republicans by about 2,000 voters to favoring the Democrats by about 8,000. It may have been that the many new Democrats in the district wanted to participate in the primary.

IA04: The turnout percentages for both parties in this district are interesting. For the Republicans, incumbent Steve King often seemed to generate better turnout as voters in the district seemed to come out to support him. King can, however, be controversial and in 2016 a primary challenger managed to get about a third of the vote. Another primary challenger in 2018 did not do as well, but Republican turnout in the district dropped to barely over 20% in 2018 when it had averaged over 25% in the prior four primaries. The controversy generated by King also affected the Democrats. IA04 was long seen as a safe Republican seat, so it was often hard to find a strong Democrat to run against him. In 2018, however, three

Democrats ran a fairly vigorous campaign for the nomination, which likely helped to drive turnout. Although the Democrats' turnout in this district was the lowest of the four, it was also about 10 points above the average of the prior four primaries.

### **Presidential Year Primary of 2020**

As noted previously, primary turnout tends to be down in presidential years. That was certainly not the case for the 2020 primary as turnout for both Democrats and Republicans was up sharply. Even so, it was not entirely a surprise. During the spring when activities were being shut down or curtailed because of the pandemic, it was clear that candidates would have to drastically change the way they campaigned. That might have resulted in low turnout, but there was a major push to get voters to use mailed absentee ballots for the primary.

As a bit of a trial run for the general election, the Iowa Secretary of State mailed an absentee ballot request form to every voter. As a result, far more people than usual decided to request a primary ballot. Those doing so included on the order of 60,000 No Party voters who requested a Democrat or Republican primary ballot. Doing so automatically changed their party registration, which also contributed to the increase in primary turnout.

Aside from the absentee ballot situation, other factors certainly increased turnout. In particular, Republican Senator Joni Ernst was up for reelection and Democrats were hopeful that they could defeat her. For Republicans, they looked to challenge two first-term representatives and to field a candidate for an open seat. As a reminder, state-wide turnout for Democrats was the highest it had been for the period examined. For Republicans it was the highest in a presidential year and the highest since 2010.

Figure 12 shows turnout in the districts.

IA01: For the Democrats, first-term Representative Abby Finkenauer was seen as vulnerable by Republicans. Democrats certainly wanted to hold this seat and it is possible that turnout in the primary was up a bit to support her. Turnout for Democrats in this district was the second highest of the four at 42.80%. Despite having lost the district in 2018, Republicans saw Finkenauer as vulnerable. Even so, only two candidates were in the primary and it seemed that former TV anchor Ashley Hinson was clearly the favorite and she won the nomination by more than a 3-to-1 margin. Turnout for Republicans in this district was the third lowest of the four.

IA02: Long time Representative Dave Loebsack decided to retire which made this an open seat. This district had long been seen as safe for Democrats, so it is a little surprising that there was not more interest in the Democrats' primary. When it

came down to it, the only name on the ballot was that Rita Hart. Hart had been a school teacher and she and her husband operated a farm. She had also been a State Senator and the Democrats' Lieutenant Governor nominee for the 2018 race. The latter gave her more name recognition and campaign experience than would ordinarily be the case for a State senator. The lack of competition in the primary did not help boost turnout and it was the third highest in this district, though still above 40%. Five candidates joined the race for Republicans. Three were basically also-rans. The front-runner seemed to be Dr. Mariannette Miller-Meeks who had run three times before. Just as she had enhanced her political resume before her third run, since then she had been elected a State Senator and was on the Republican State Central Committee. Her main competition was Bobby Schilling. Schilling was a business owner but had also been a US Representative in an Illinois district. Miller-Meeks ended up winning with 43.11% to Schilling's 32.87%. Republican turnout in the district was the second highest of the four at 35.23%.

- IA03: This was the second of the Iowa districts that Democrats flipped in 2018. First-term Representative Cindy Axne was also seen as vulnerable by Republicans and it seems that Democrats may have turned out to support her somewhat as Democrats had the highest turnout in this district at 42.88%. David Young was the incumbent that Axne beat and he ran to reclaim his seat. That cleared the field except for one other person that Young defeated easily. Republican turnout in this district was the lowest of the four, but still quite good at 33.02%.
- IA04: As noted previously, this is a safe district for Republicans and Democrats usually do not challenge here. As also noted, however, incumbent Steve King had been controversial. So much so that US House leadership stripped him of his committee assignments in early 2019. King had primary competition in the previous two elections. This time Republicans got more serious about it and State Senator Randy Feenstra announced that he would challenge King. Several other candidates also announced that they would enter the race. There was some concern that this would split the anti-King vote sufficiently that he would end up winning. As it turned out, although four candidates were in the race with King, three were also-rans and Feenstra beat King 44.17% to 34.74%. Not surprisingly, this race drove up turnout, which was the highest of the four districts at 41.86%. Even though this was considered a safe Republican district, King's opponent in 2018 came very close to beating him. That candidate, J.D. Scholten, decided to challenge King again in 2020 and no one else entered the race. Although turnout for Democrats in this district was the lowest of the four, it was still a higher than usual 38.57%.

## Discussion/Concluding Remarks

An important reason for looking at primary turnout is to determine the extent to which it might be an indicator of general election turnout. As I noted early in this paper, the short answer for Iowa primaries seems to be a qualified no.

A main reason why Iowa primary turnout is not a good indicator of general election turnout is that the presidential candidates are not on the primary ballot because of the Iowa Caucuses. That means the only state-wide office on the presidential year primary ballot occurs when there is a US Senate race. Given the inclination of Iowa voters to return their incumbents to office, the nomination for the challenging party in a Senate race might not generate sufficient interest or quality candidates to provide insight into the overall mood of the voters.

Turnout percentages in primaries held during midterm election years are a slightly better indicator of later general election turnout. As noted previously, it was clear fairly early in 2006 that it was going to be a good election year for Democrats, not least because of the sixth-year fatigue that affects the president's party in the second-term midterms. The 2006 primary was the one time when Democrats' primary turnout was substantially higher than their turnout in other years, and well above that of Republicans. That said, the general election turnout in 2006 for Democrats was actually 3.62% lower than it was in 2002. What the turnout percentage by itself does not show is the sharp increase in voter registrations for Democrats. Thus, the enthusiasm shown by Democrats for the primary in June continued through the general election, even if the general election turnout percentage did not also increase.

Republican primary turnout is more closely associated with general election turnout. Although general election turnout for both parties is down in midterm years, it was down a bit less for Republicans in 2002 and 2010 when they had their highest midterm primary turnout. Republicans had their lowest midterm general election turnout in 2006, which was also the year of their lowest midterm primary turnout. In addition, three of the years when turnout for Democrats was higher than that of Republicans (2006, 2008, and 2018) were years when Democrats had substantial electoral success, even though there was not much change in general election turnout. Although many thought 2016 would be a good year for Republicans, the effect on down ticket races of Donald Trump as the Republican presidential nominee suggested Democrats might have had a better than expected year in US House and Senate races. This may have also been suggested by the fact that 2016 was also a fourth year that Democrats' primary turnout percentage was higher than that of Republicans, if only very slightly. Midterm turnout for Republicans in 2014 was up, but about midway between the low of 2006 and highs of 2002 and 2010. This suggested Republicans would have a good year, as they should in sixth-year midterms. It did not seem that the turnout was up enough to suggest a wave year, but many thought it turned out that way. In contrast,

Republicans' 2016 primary turnout percentage was well below the highs of 2002 and 2010 and only slightly higher than the lows of 2006 and 2008. Again, most expected 2016 to be a good year for Republicans given the difficulty of the same party holding the White House three terms in a row, but Trump's nomination seemed to have erased those expectations and dampened enthusiasm among GOP voters. With about two months before the general election there still seemed to be a general lack of enthusiasm for either major party candidate. That depressed turnout percentages regardless of the actual outcome in the presidential and congressional races. General election turnout for both Democrats and Republicans was down in 2018 from 2016, but less than we would normally expect for a midterm year. This was particularly so for Democrats and we might have gotten an indication of this from their better than usual primary turnout.

Turnout was up substantially for the 2020 primaries, as it was for the general election. The usual factors no doubt contributed to the increase, but the main reason was the reaction to sending absentee ballot request forms to every voter. This was especially true for the primaries, as many voters who would not have otherwise voted requested a primary ballot.

As a preface to my discussions of the races in the districts I noted that one could not compare individual districts across the time periods because of periodic redistricting. For that reason I chose to compare turnout across the districts for each election. Of course, that approach has problems as well. At one level, it is difficult to determine a "base" turnout level for a particular primary on which other factors may enhance or dampen turnout. A second potential problem is that although state-wide races in midterm primaries can drive up turnout, the competitiveness of the primary battle and whether the ultimate opponent will be an incumbent are also important. For example, a very competitive primary between weak candidates not expected to win in the general election would not be likely to enhance turnout.

The competitiveness of the primaries in conjunction with the general quality of the candidates did seem to be factors that affected turnout in the individual Congressional Districts, but the effect did not seem consistent.

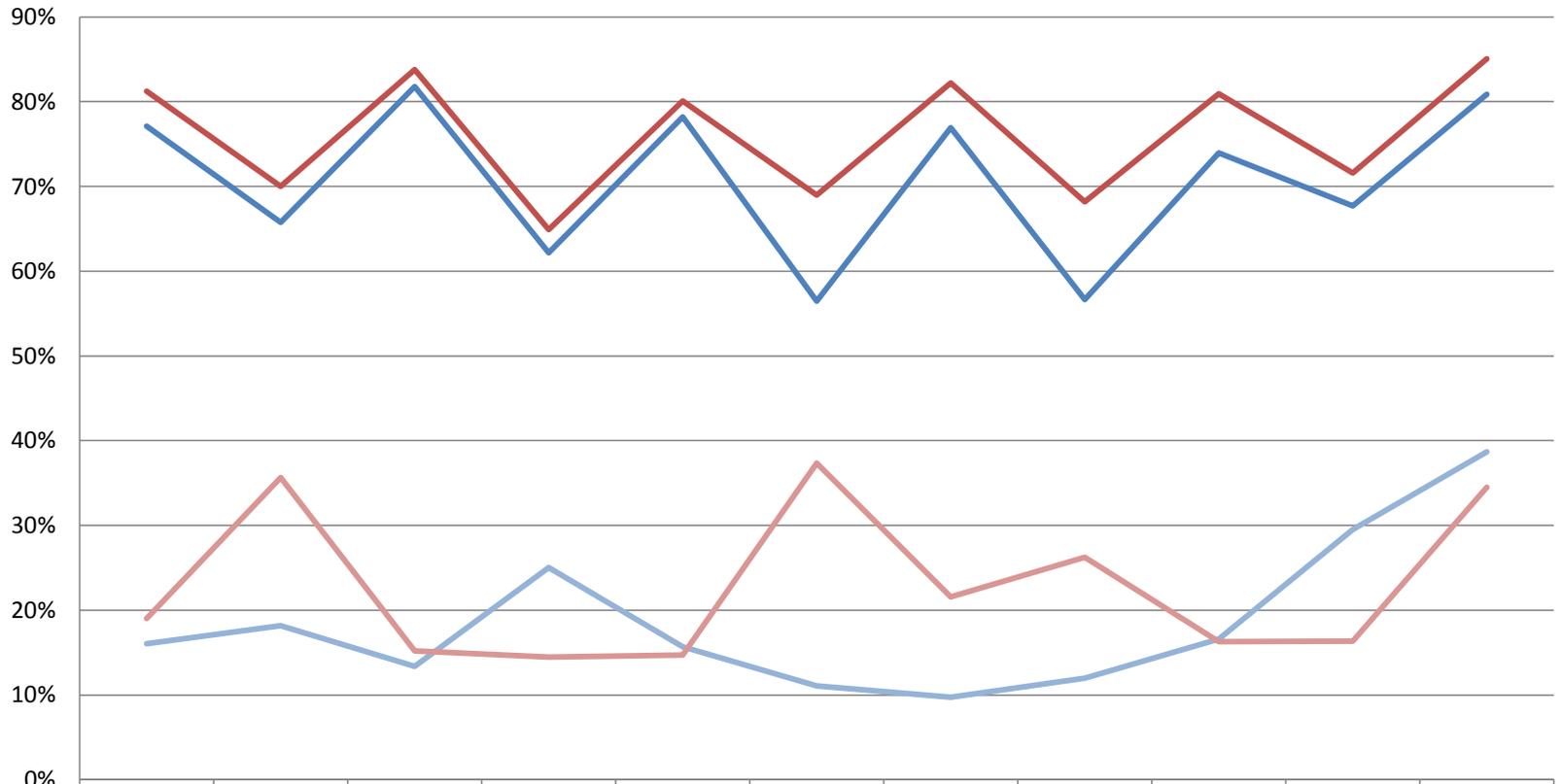
In many of the descriptions of the districts I mentioned the idea that voters would turn out (or not) to support their candidate, often the incumbent. This is a rather slippery concept that is more likely a reflection of other even less tangible factors. It may be that many of these voters were those who would vote anyway. Even so, there were instances where party regulars were clearly either more or less enthusiastic about supporting their candidate even in a primary. Not to pick on any particular candidate, but an example of this was Representative Jim Leach's moderate voting record which often irritated Republican voters in his district.

Although the district descriptions above focused on the Congressional races, local races can obviously affect turnout as well. All of Iowa's 100 State House seats and half of its 50 State Senate seats are up every two years. In addition, there will be city and county primaries that could also affect turnout. Even to the extent Iowa voters like their incumbents, a competitive race in a swing state legislative district or county could increase turnout. This might not greatly affect turnout in the Congressional District, but in two situations the effect of such races might be felt. The first is when a populous county has a competitive race. For example, Democrats in Johnson County have a very large voter registration advantage. Republicans usually do not even field a candidate in state legislative or county races. Thus, when an open seat occurs it often creates a very competitive primary because everyone knows the race is won or lost there. In a large county such as Johnson, this can affect turnout in the overall district.

A second way state legislative races may affect turnout occurs after redistricting. As mentioned previously, Iowa has a nonpartisan redistricting process that by law cannot take into consideration the homes or party affiliations of current officeholders. In addition to creating incumbent versus incumbent races at the Congressional level, it does so at the state legislative level as well. The new redistricting plan adopted for the 2012 election created many such races; some inter-party, but many intra-party. In one instance three legislators of the same party ended up in the same state district. Sometimes these conflicts can be solved by an office holder moving or retiring, but some are sorted out in a primary.

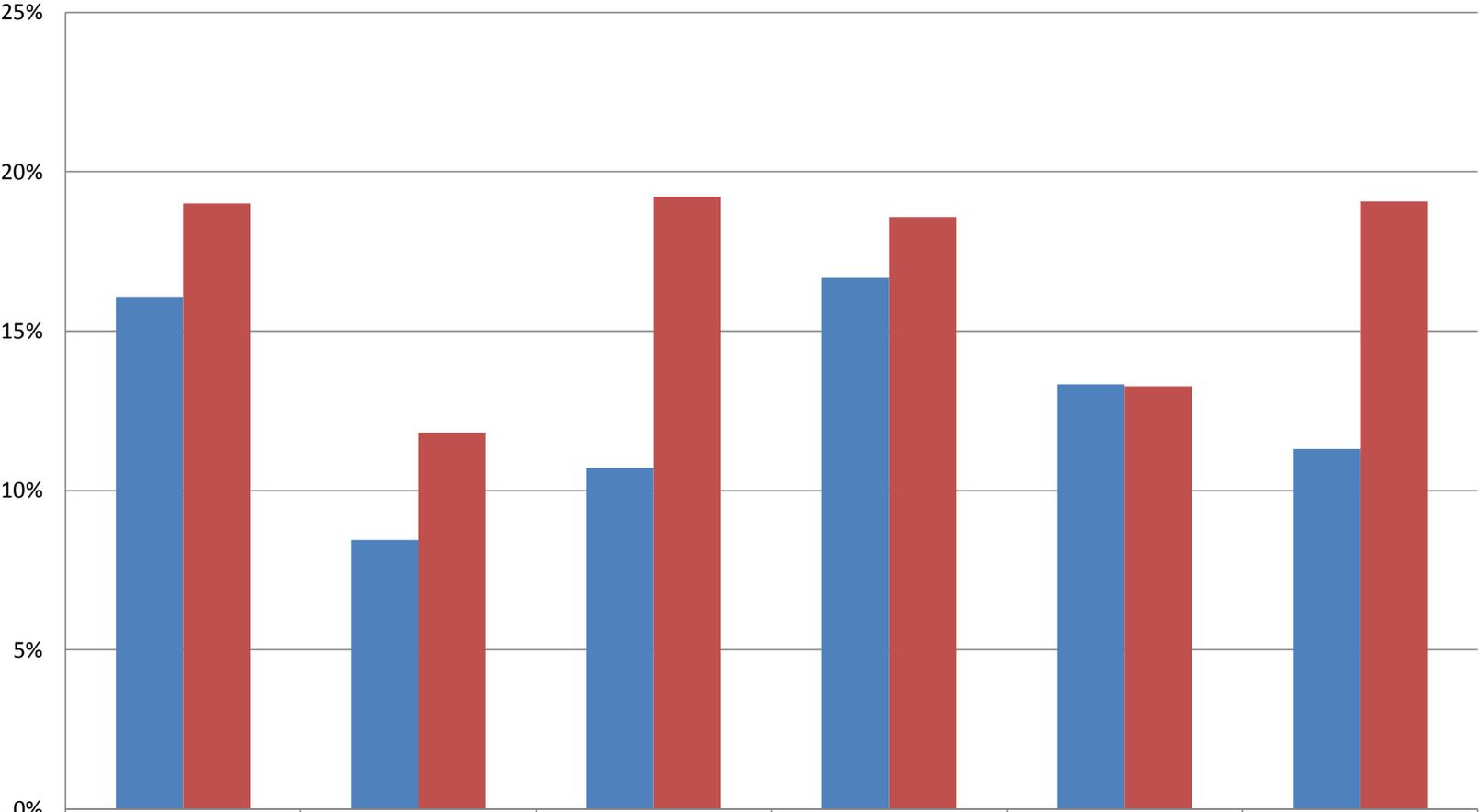
Despite these cautions regarding drawing definite conclusions about either the factors affecting primary turnout or what that turnout says about later general elections, it is no surprise that factors such as open seats or weak incumbents and competitive primaries with quality candidates will tend to increase turnout.

**Figure 1: Democrat and Republican Turnout Percentage in Iowa Primaries and General Elections Since 2000**



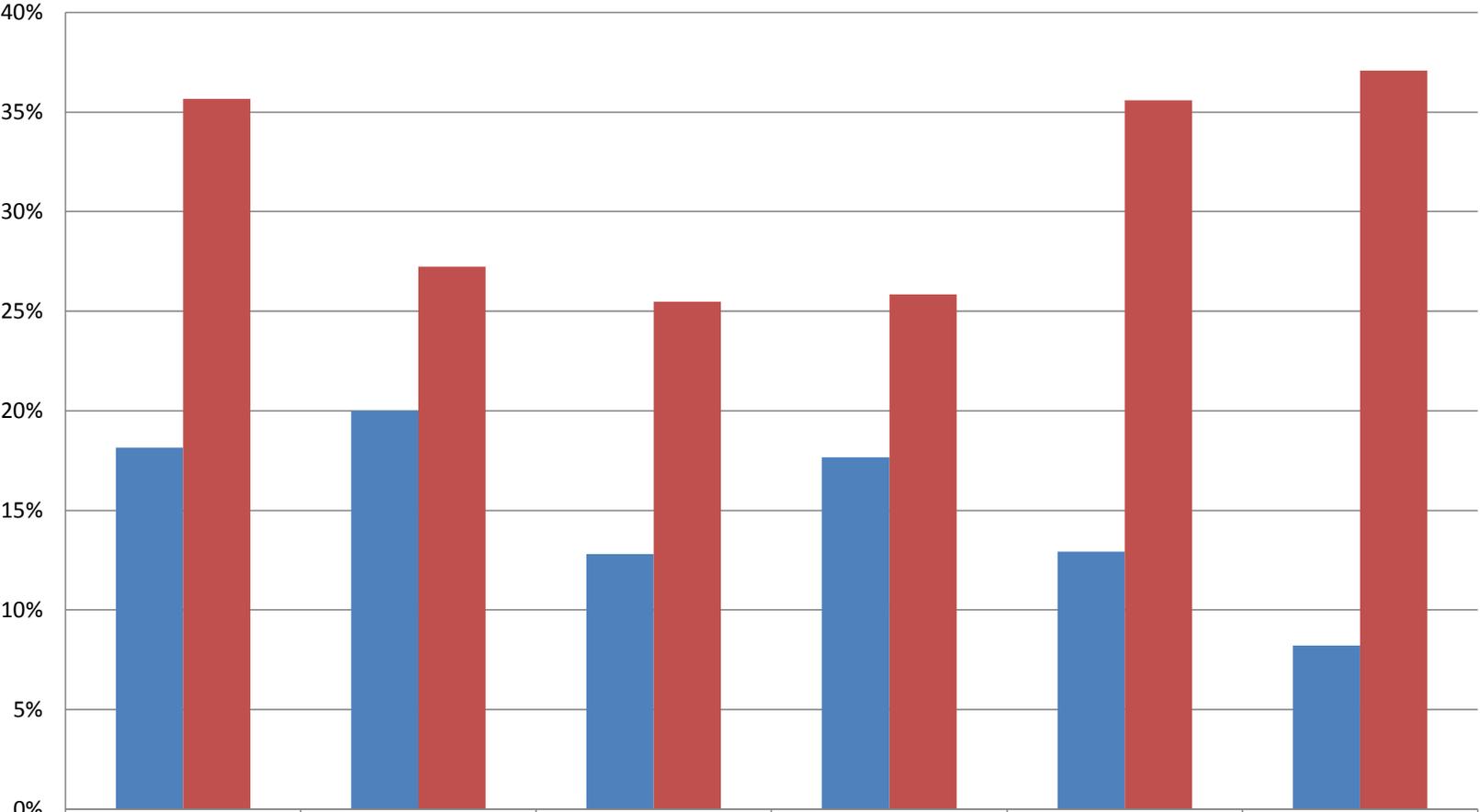
	2000	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020
D-Primary	16.07%	18.15%	13.35%	25.06%	15.71%	11.07%	9.73%	12.00%	16.57%	29.55%	38.69%
D-General	77.13%	65.79%	81.82%	62.17%	78.20%	56.48%	76.94%	56.66%	73.96%	67.72%	80.87%
R-Primary	19.01%	35.65%	15.21%	14.49%	14.71%	37.35%	21.56%	26.24%	16.26%	16.36%	34.51%
R-General	81.26%	70.03%	83.77%	64.89%	80.07%	68.98%	82.22%	68.20%	80.95%	71.60%	85.04%

**Figure 2: 2000 Primary Turnout Percentages for Iowa Congressional Districts**



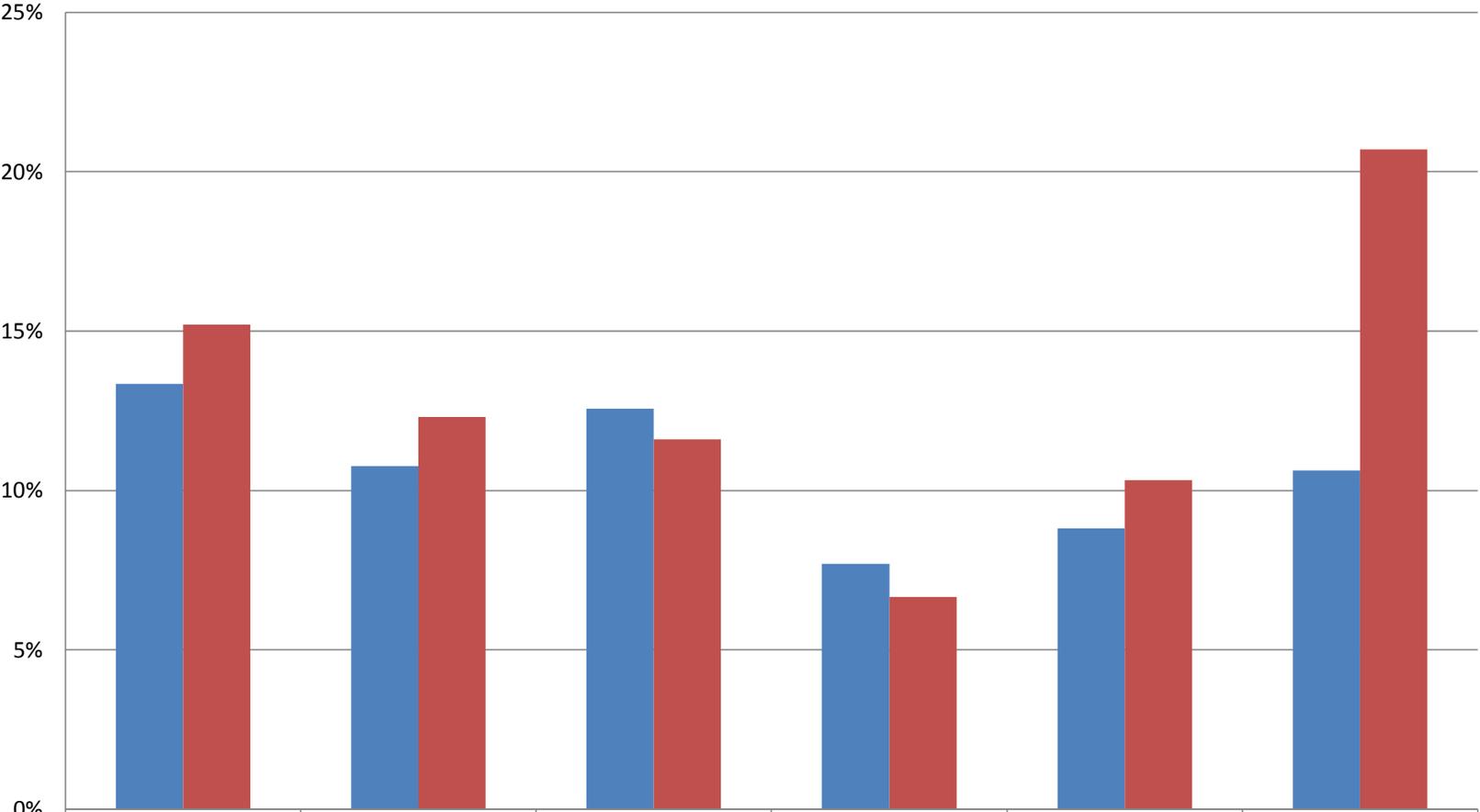
Primary % D	16.07%	8.44%	10.71%	16.68%	13.33%	11.31%
Primary % R	19.01%	11.82%	19.22%	18.58%	13.28%	19.07%

**Figure 3: 2002 Primary Turnout Percentages for Iowa Congressional Districts**



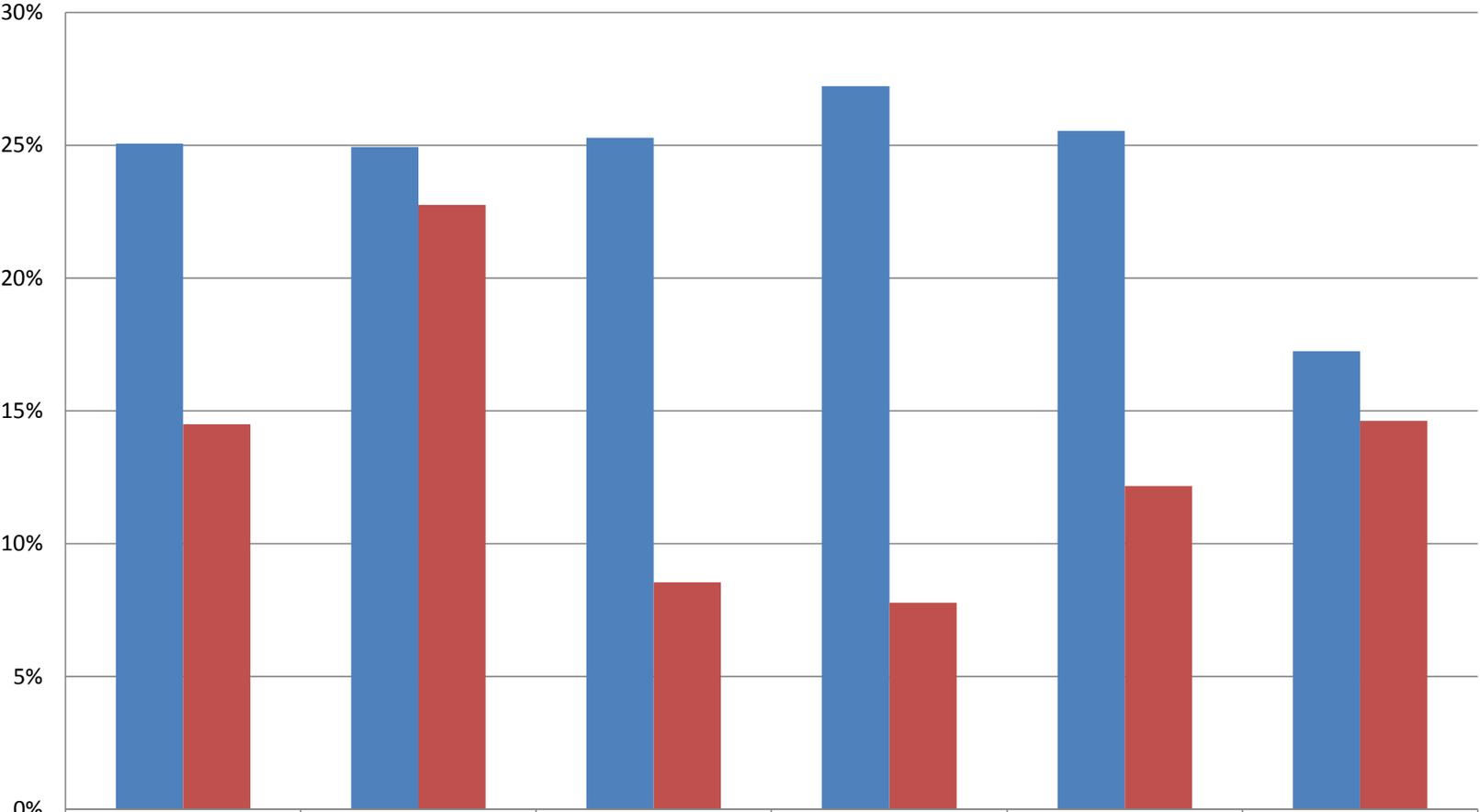
■ Primary % D	18.15%	20.01%	12.80%	17.67%	12.92%	8.21%
■ Primary % R	35.65%	27.23%	25.48%	25.85%	35.58%	37.08%

**Figure 4: 2004 Primary Turnout Percentages for Iowa Congressional Districts**



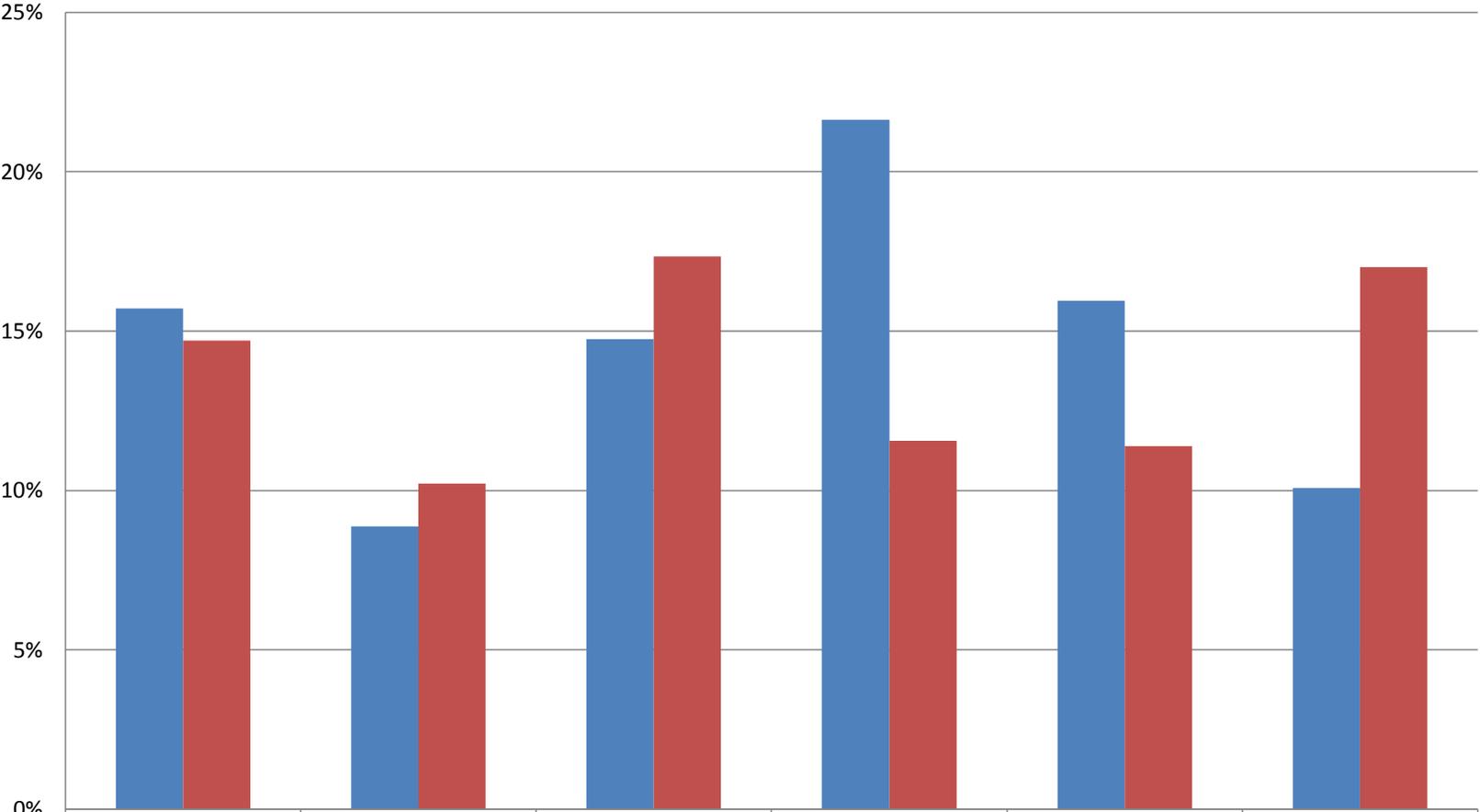
	State	IA01	IA02	IA03	IA04	IA05
■ Primary % D	13.35%	10.77%	12.57%	7.70%	8.82%	10.63%
■ Primary % R	15.21%	12.30%	11.60%	6.66%	10.32%	20.69%

**Figure 5: 2006 Primary Turnout Percentages for Iowa Congressional Districts**



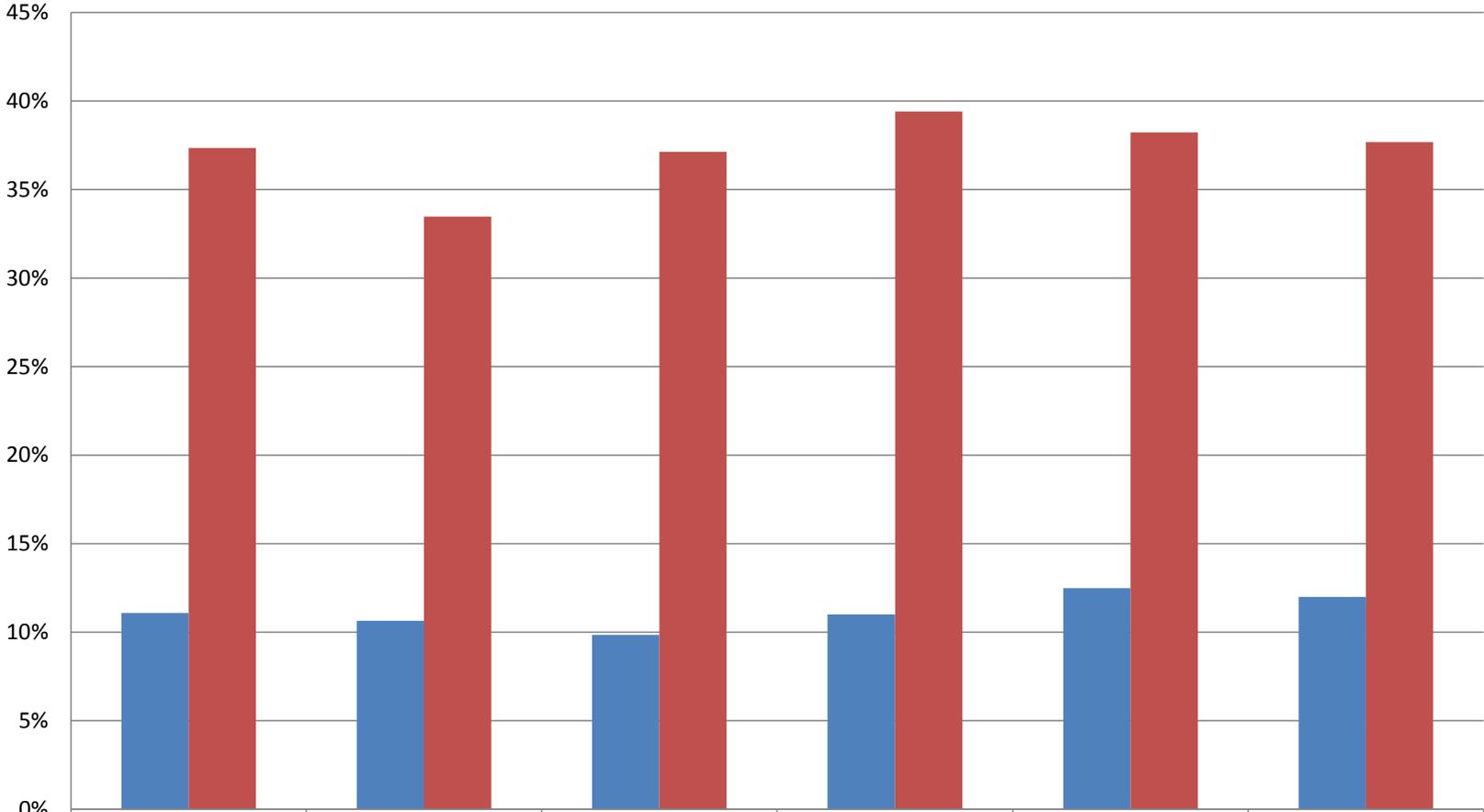
■ Primary % D	25.06%	24.94%	25.28%	27.22%	25.53%	17.24%
■ Primary % R	14.49%	22.75%	8.55%	7.77%	12.17%	14.62%

**Figure 6: 2008 Primary Turnout Percentages for Iowa Congressional Districts**



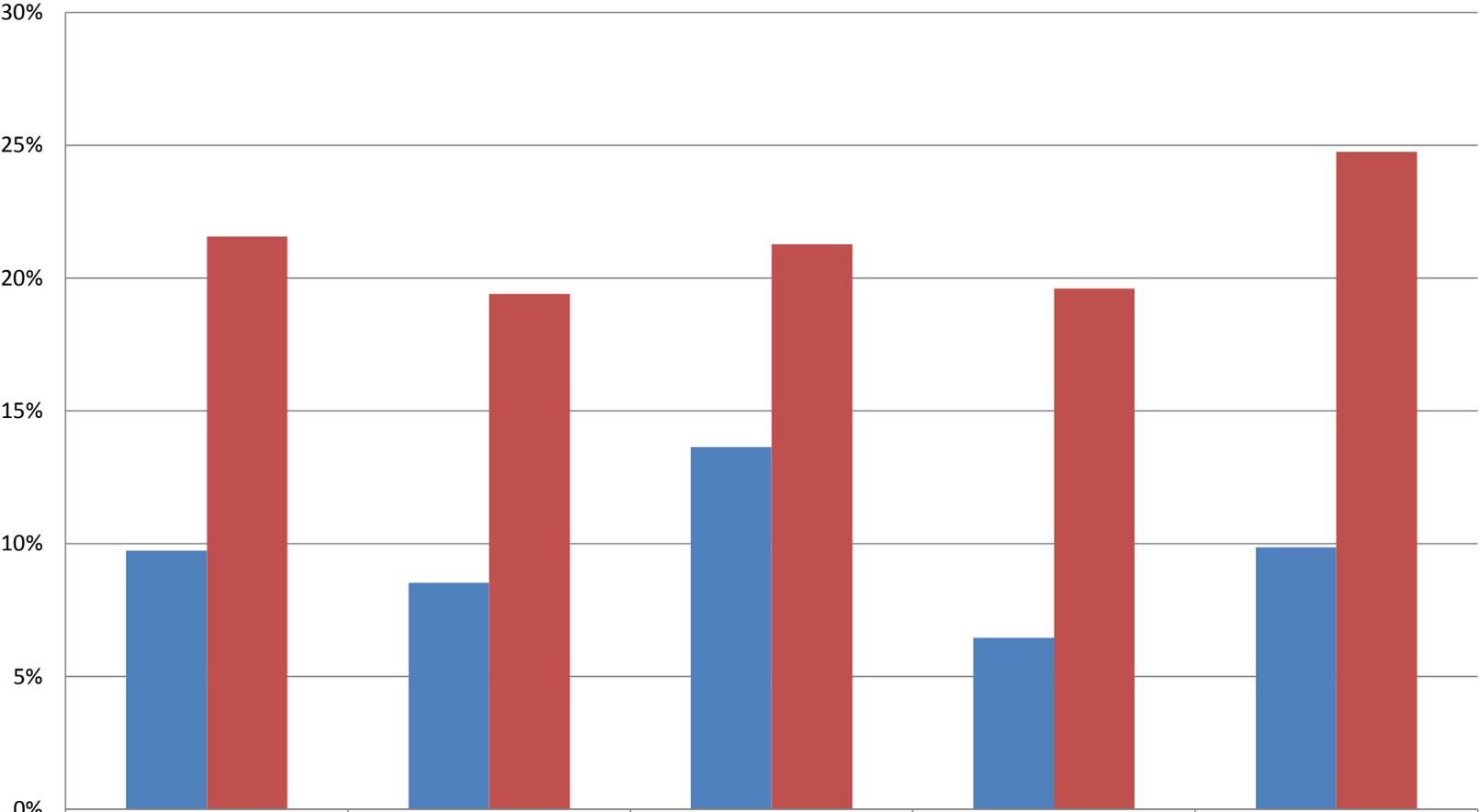
	State	IA01	IA02	IA03	IA04	IA05
■ Primary % D	15.71%	8.88%	14.75%	21.64%	15.95%	10.08%
■ Primary % R	14.71%	10.21%	17.35%	11.56%	11.39%	17.00%

**Figure 7: 2010 Primary Turnout Percentages for Iowa Congressional Districts**



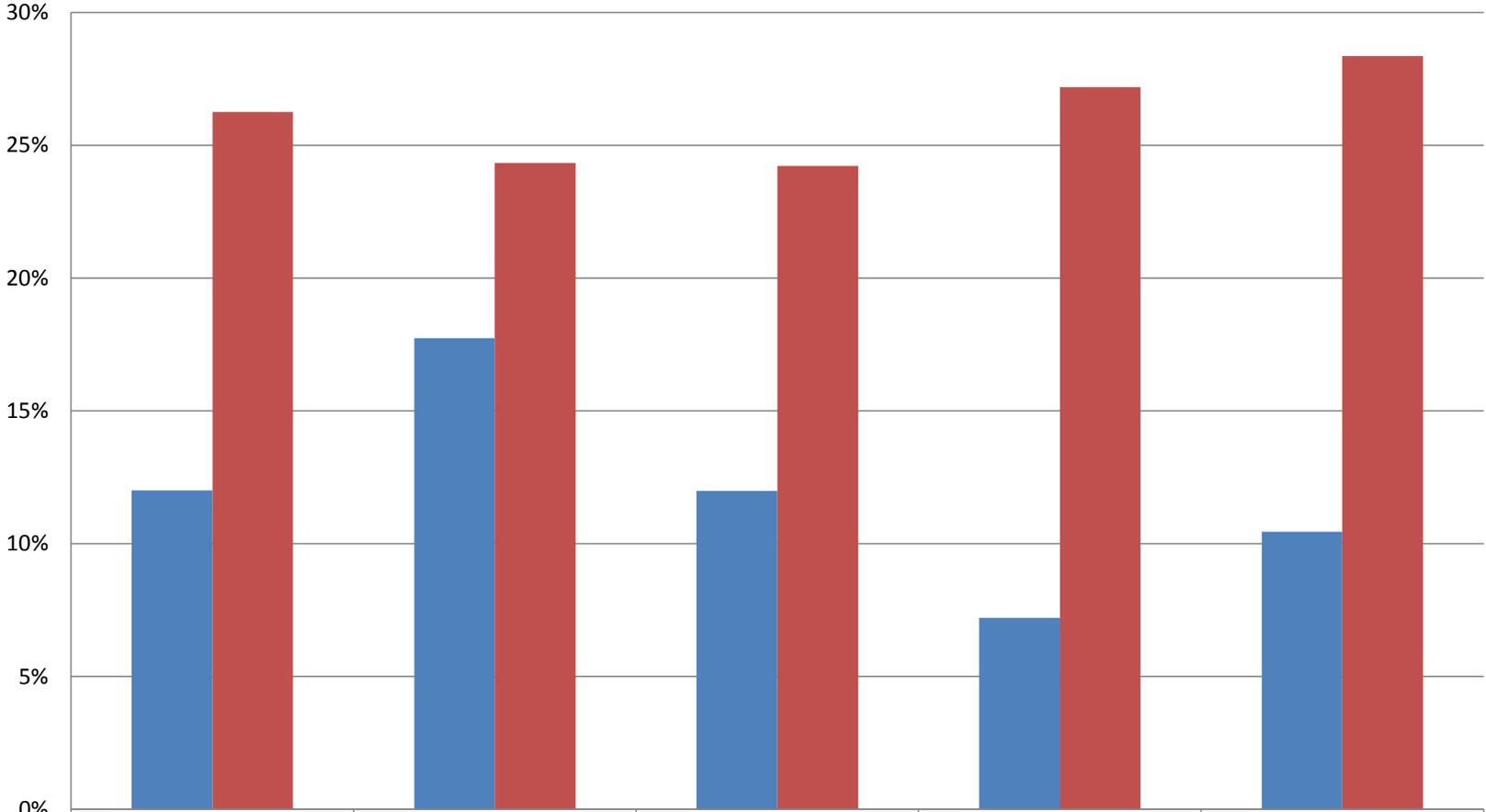
Primary % D	11.07%	10.65%	9.85%	11.00%	12.48%	11.99%
Primary % R	37.35%	33.48%	37.13%	39.41%	38.23%	37.67%

**Figure 8: 2012 Primary Turnout Percentages for Iowa Congressional Districts**



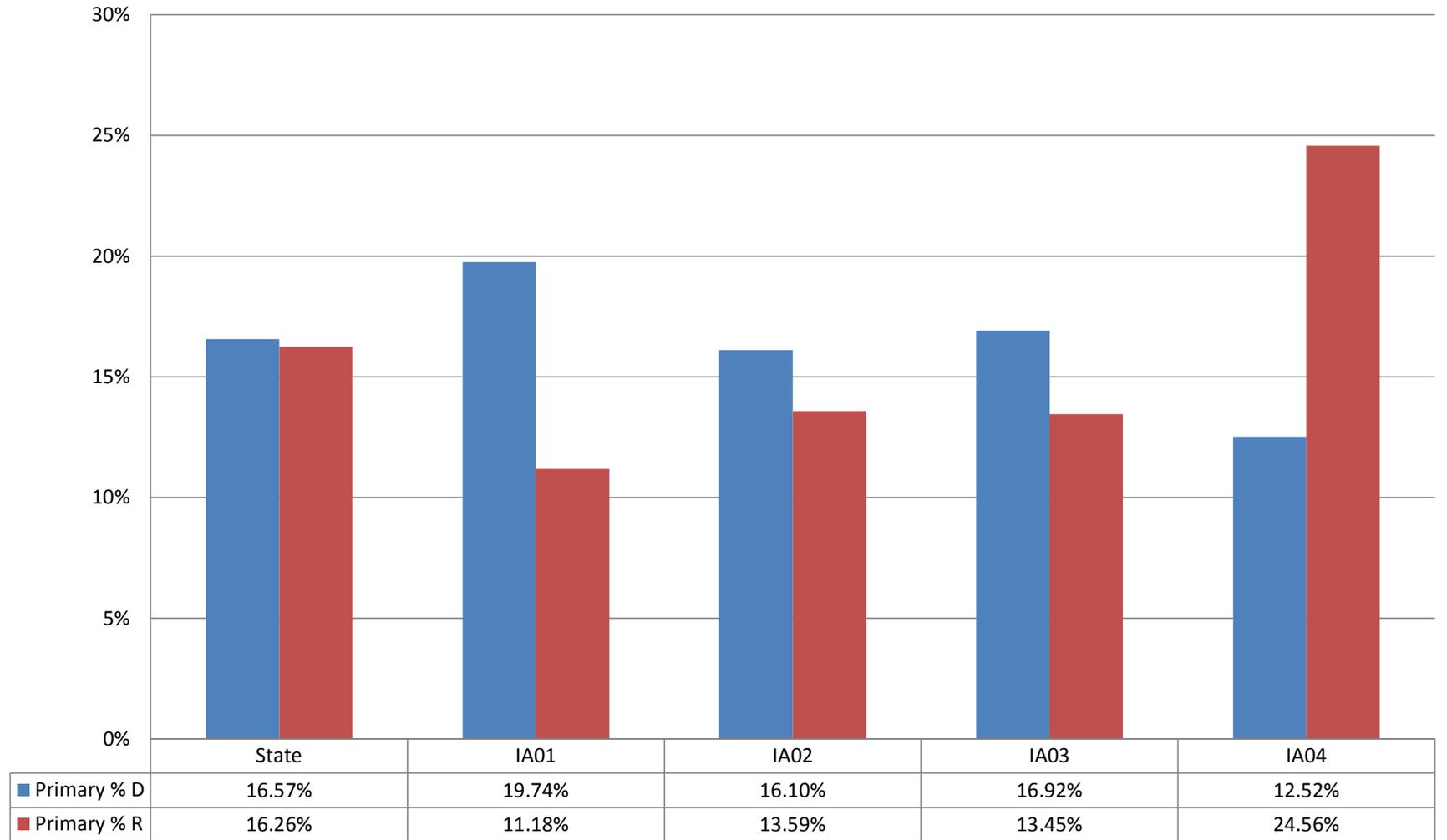
■ Primary % D	9.73%	8.52%	13.64%	6.46%	9.87%
■ Primary % R	21.56%	19.40%	21.27%	19.60%	24.75%

**Figure 9: 2014 Primary Turnout Percentages for Iowa Congressional Districts**

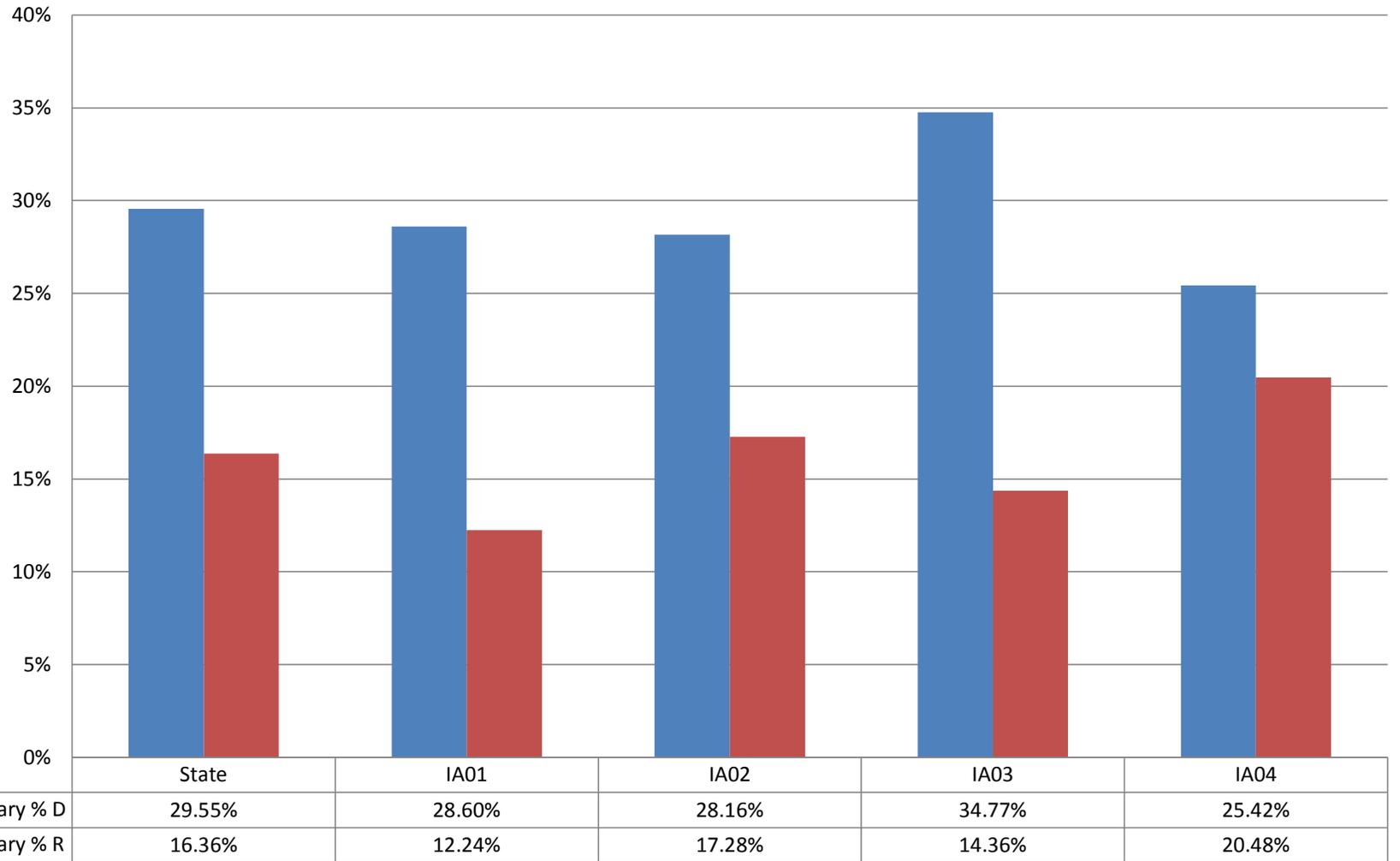


	State	IA01	IA02	IA03	IA04
■ Primary % D	12.00%	17.74%	11.98%	7.21%	10.44%
■ Primary % R	26.24%	24.33%	24.22%	27.18%	28.36%

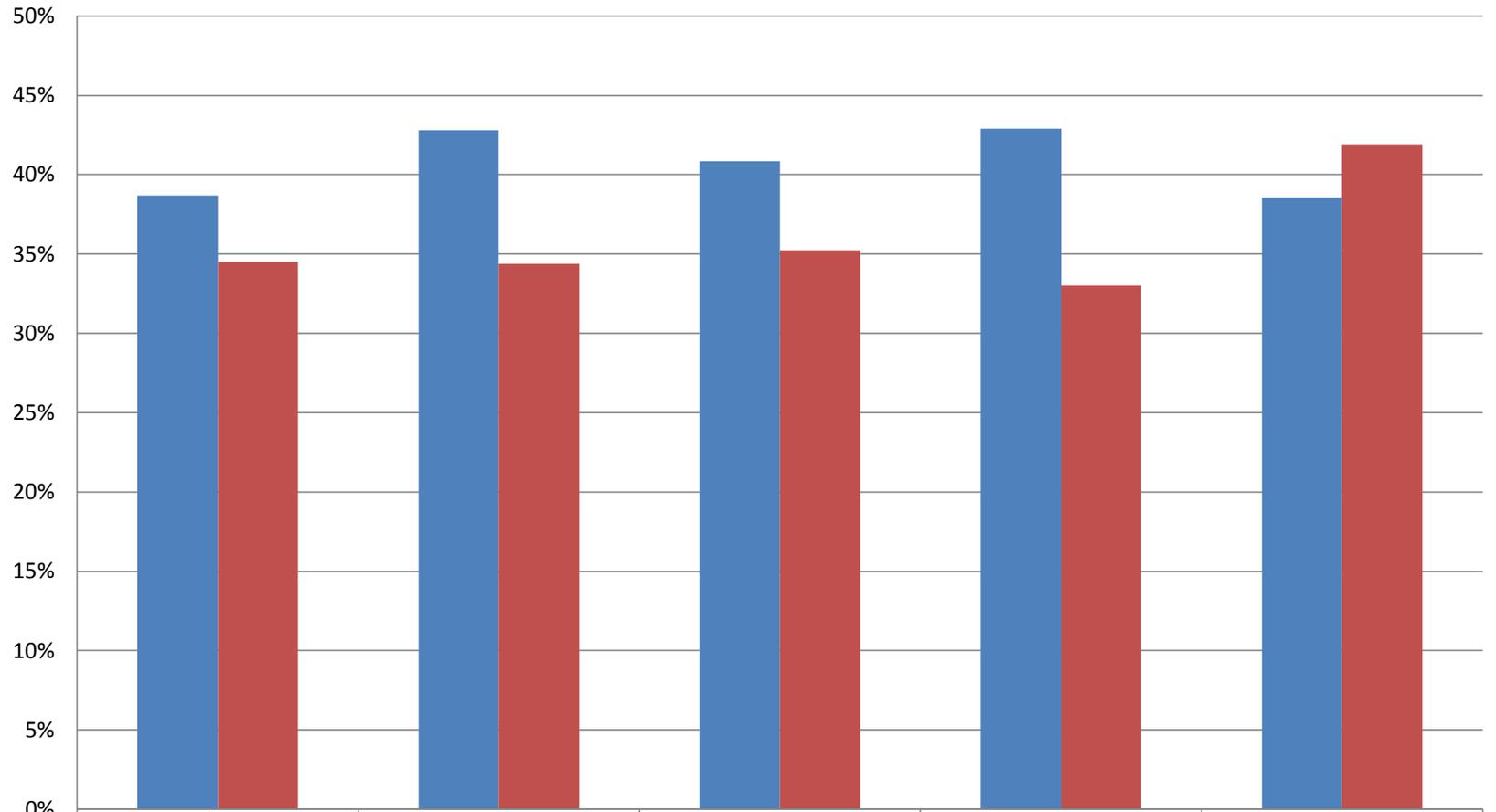
**Figure 10: 2016 Primary Turnout Percentages for Iowa Congressional Districts**



**Figure 11: 2018 Primary Turnout Percentages for Iowa Congressional Districts**



**Figure 12: 2020 Primary Turnout Percentages for Iowa Congressional Districts**



■ Primary % D	38.69%	42.80%	40.86%	42.88%	38.57%
■ Primary % R	34.51%	34.38%	35.23%	33.02%	41.86%