

**Iowa Voting Series, Paper 10:
An Examination of Iowa Absentee Ballots Requested/Sent and
Returned Since 2010**

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Abstract

This is the tenth paper in a series examining aspects of voting in Iowa. In this paper I examine the timing of absentee requests or sent ballots and returns in general and by party. Although the statewide data are available for only six elections, the data confirm the greater effort placed on early voting in presidential elections. Nevertheless, absentee voting is increasing in midterm elections. When examining the early vote effort by party we see that Democrats do better at the early voting game, but Republicans are catching up. The fewest absentee requests or sent ballots come from No Party voters, particularly in midterm elections, which is no surprise given their significant turnout drop in midterms. The results also show a persistent gap between the number of requested or sent absentee ballots and the number returned. The size of this gap varies by party with Republicans having the highest return rate followed by Democrats and then No Party voters.

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Updates

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

- June 2015: Initial release; update to footnote 22 after posting
- December 2016: Update for inclusion of 2016 data
- May 2019: Update for inclusion of 2018 data and related text changes
- December 2020: Update for inclusion of 2020 data and related text changes; data for “Sent” absentee ballots rather than “Requested” used for elections 2014 and following

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In the sixth paper in this series¹ I examined absentee voting in Iowa in midterm and presidential elections since 2000, in general and by party.² In this paper I return to absentee voting to examine the timing of the requests and the number of ballots returned. As with the prior papers in this series my focus will be on the statistics involved rather than theorizing about the reasons for particular turnout percentages. Nevertheless, the goal of this paper, like the others in the series, is to examine aspects of voting in Iowa with an eye to future elections and to provide some background and context to discussions about Iowa voters.

Data

As with prior papers, data for this examination were gathered from the Election Results & Statistics page of the Iowa Secretary of State's website.³ This page provides links to election results for a variety of primary and general election contests in Iowa, including those for presidential and midterm elections. The absentee statistics examined here are obtained from the Daily Absentee Statistics links.⁴ These reports only began with the 2010 election, so there will only be data from six general elections to examine. The format of the six reports varies somewhat, but all indicate the number of absentee ballots requested and returned for each of the three parties in Iowa (Democrats,

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

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

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

⁴ For example, the daily absentee statistics for the 2014 midterm election can be found at <http://sos.iowa.gov/elections/pdf/2014/general/absenteestats.pdf>.

Republicans, and No Party voters).⁵ The available reports also include some form of an “Other” category. For the 2010, 2012, 2016, and 2020 reports, “Other” is the actual label used. For the 2014 report the Other category is replaced by “Iowa Green” and “Libertarian,” which are the two Non-Party Political Organizations one can choose as alternatives to the regular Political Parties (Democratic, Republican, and No Party) when registering to vote in Iowa.⁶ The 2018 report includes an Other category, but also has one for the Libertarian Party which was official for the 2018 election.⁷ Regardless of how it’s labeled, the number of voters in a category other than Democrat, Republican, or No Party is quite small relatively speaking, never reaching even 0.6% of the overall total of those requesting an absentee ballot. Thus, for purposes of this paper I will add data regarding such other voters (again, however labeled) to that of No Party voters.

An additional note on the data is necessary due to the 2020 results. The reports for the 2014 through 2020 elections also include numbers for “Sent” absentee ballots. Through 2018 the difference between Requested and Sent ballots was minimal, varying between 514 fewer for 2018 to 808 fewer for 2016. For these three elections the difference was about 0.1%. Given that small difference and the fact that there was no Sent category for the 2010 or 2012 elections prior versions of this paper used the Requested numbers for the analysis. Unfortunately, 2020 proved to be quite different in that there were 13,014 fewer absentee ballots sent than requested.⁸ Although part of the increased number was due to the sharp increase in absentee ballot requests, as a percentage it was also more than 10 times greater than prior years. Thus, it would have been inappropriate to continue to use the Requested numbers for 2020. Given that change, the discussion that follows was also updated to use the Sent numbers for the 2014 through 2018 elections.⁹

Absentee Voting in Iowa

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

⁵ “No Party” is what Iowa calls its independents. It seems a little odd to refer to unaffiliated No Party voters as a party. In earlier versions of some papers in the series I referred to the party registration choices as “categories.” That proved somewhat cumbersome, so I will use “party” to include No Party voters.

⁶ See the first paper in the series for more details on voter registration in Iowa.

⁷ As noted in prior papers, the Libertarian Party gained official status following the 2016 election but lost it following the 2018 election and returned to Non-Party Political Organization status.

⁸ As noted below, there was a big push for voters to use mail-in ballots. I received at least six absentee ballot request forms in the mail from government officials and political parties. It is possible that some voters submitted multiple requests which likely contributed to the large difference between requests and ballots sent.

⁹ The mix of using requests for two elections and sent ballots for the others causes some descriptive issues, so bear with me when I switch back and forth between the two.

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

Various reforms over the years aimed at increasing voter turnout also affected absentee voting. The reforms generally removed request deadlines and the requirement of a justification for the absentee ballot.¹⁰ In addition, the basic notion of absentee voting has been replaced by what is now often referred to as “early voting.”

Early voting is much like regular voting in that it is done in-person, but there are two main differences. The first is that once a ballot is filled out it is placed in a security envelope that is then stored until Election Day when the envelope is opened and the ballot counted. The second difference is that the early voting does not take place at one’s regular polling place. There are two basic locations for in-person early voting. The first is at the county auditor’s office.¹¹ Such in-person voting in Iowa began about six weeks before Election Day in elections through 2016. Beginning with the 2018 election the time for early voting was reduced from 40 to 29 days.¹² The second is at a “satellite early voting station.” Such satellite voting stations are smaller versions of regular voting stations, but voters from any precinct can vote at them. As with in-person voting at the county auditor’s office, the ballot is placed in a security envelope and then placed in a ballot box that is stored until Election Day.

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

¹⁰ Here is a link to the Iowa Secretary of State’s webpage for requesting a mailed absentee ballot: <https://sos.iowa.gov/elections/electioninfo/absenteeinfo.html>. Clicking on the download link there brings up a pdf of the request form that can be printed or downloaded.

¹¹ In Iowa, the county auditor is the local elected official in charge of elections along with his or her other duties. At the state level, the Secretary of State is the elected official in charge of elections. To make things a bit more confusing, Iowa also has an Auditor of State, whose duties are financial.

¹² Other aspects of the law that reduced the time for early voting, specifically the voter identification requirements, did not take effect until elections in 2019.

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

Despite the popularity of in-person early voting, more traditional absentee ballots are still available and used by many people. Procedurally, although no reason need be given for requesting an absentee ballot, the voter must still fill out the request to have a ballot mailed to him or her by the county auditor. The time limit for requesting a mailed ballot is now 10 days before an election.¹³ As most who watch election returns know, ballots returned by mail in Iowa can be counted as long as they are postmarked by the day before the election even if received a few days later.¹⁴

Aside from basic procedural differences between traditional absentee voting and in-person early voting there is also a fundamental difference in terms of requesting such a ballot. Although parties and campaigns will encourage voters to make use of satellite voting stations, it is the voter who makes the basic decision as to when and where to do so. As with regular voting, the voter wishing to cast an in-person early vote simply shows up at the designated time and location for the satellite station and requests a ballot. In contrast, parties and campaigns will actively solicit mailed absentee ballot requests from voters. The general goal is to boost turnout for a particular party or campaign. Campaign or party workers are usually trained in the procedures for soliciting absentee ballot requests and will do so while going door to door or at a location with heavy foot traffic (again, grocery stores, etc.). An additional goal of soliciting absentee ballot requests is to reach voters who may be less reliable in terms of their voting history. Parties and campaigns often have access to a voter's voting history. Those who have a history of not always voting will be targeted for absentee ballot requests. Shut-ins and those who might have more difficulty voting (e.g., elderly voters in care facilities) are also targeted.

Two aspects of the conventional wisdom regarding absentee voting are worth mentioning at this point. The first bit of conventional wisdom is that Democrats are

¹³ The earliest one can request a mailed ballot is 120 days before the election. See the Johnson County Auditor's website (https://www.johnsoncountyiowa.gov/dept_auditor_elections.aspx?id=22232).

¹⁴ In the past the Johnson County Auditor's website noted that the United States Postal Service no longer postmarks local mail. This is important because ballots received after Election Day without a postmark cannot be counted. As an alternative to mailing a late ballot, in Iowa absentee ballots mailed to voters can be returned in person at the county auditor's office on Election Day before the polls close.

better at the absentee and early voting game than Republicans. This means that they do a better job of getting their voters to either request absentee ballots or to vote early at satellite voting stations. The auditor in my county (Johnson) regularly posts updates on the number of requests for absentee ballots or early votes cast and political activists of both parties keep a close eye on those figures.¹⁵ Tracking absentee ballot requests has become sufficiently popular that, as noted above, the Iowa Secretary of State now includes Daily Absentee Statistics among its posted election information. The reasonable assumption is that voters who cast absentee ballots will vote for their party's candidates, which means such votes are already "in the bank," so to speak, prior to Election Day. Along these lines, stories following the 2012 presidential election noted that Republican candidate Mitt Romney had more votes for him cast on Election Day in Iowa, but the lead amassed by Democrats as a result of their early voting efforts on behalf of President Obama was too much to overcome.¹⁶ Along with party regulars, journalists are taking more notice of such figures and sometimes write of one candidate having "a lead" over his or her opponent based on early vote figures. Such figures may also be used in projections for the race in question.¹⁷

A second bit of conventional wisdom is that Republicans tend to prefer to vote on Election Day. Although Democrats are better at the early voting game, Republicans have certainly tried to improve in this area. One stumbling block is the preference of many Republicans to wait until Election Day to cast their ballot. One might argue that this preference comes from a generally more "traditionalist" view held by many Republicans. Regardless of the reason for the preference, it does seem to put Republicans at a disadvantage as they work to catch up to Democrats in this area.

The 2020 election deserves special mention regarding these two bits of conventional wisdom. By the time many states, including Iowa, held their primaries various restrictions were in place due to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁸ These restrictions usually included limits on in-person activities as well as "social distancing" (i.e., staying at least six feet away from other people). Although in-person voting on primary day was not cancelled, early voting—especially using a traditional mail-in ballot—was strongly encouraged. As part of this effort, the Secretary of State mailed every active registered voter an absentee ballot request form. The result was that more than twice as many cast ballots in the 2020 primary as the average for the primaries in 2016 and 2018. In addition, 77.7% of the ballots cast were absentee votes, which was well over four times the percentage of the prior two primaries.

¹⁵ The eleventh paper in this series examines absentee and early voting in Johnson County.

¹⁶ See, for example, <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/dec/06/news/la-pn-obama-early-voting-key-victory-20121205>.

¹⁷ See, for example, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/upshot/north-carolina-early-vote-tracker.html>.

¹⁸ Iowa is known for the Iowa Caucuses, which in 2020 were held in February, but we also have regular primaries held in June for all other offices.

The early vote effort for the Iowa primary was a trial run of sorts for the emphasis on traditional absentee voting for the general election. Democrats, consistent with their general approval of early voting, fully embraced the additional push for mailed absentee voting. The result was that absentee ballot requests from Democrats far outpaced those from Republicans. Republicans lagged well behind Democrats but eventually joined the push for absentee requests.

Not surprisingly, the much larger number of requests from Democrats was frequently noted in the press. Even to the extent that most expected Republicans would make up ground on Election Day, the much larger percentage of absentee ballots turned out to be the basis for various concerns about the integrity of some election results. The details are beyond the scope of this paper, but the short version is that votes cast in-person on Election Day would be reported fairly quickly. State procedures for counting early votes vary, but generally early ballots cannot be opened and counted until Election Day. Given the additional procedures necessary to process them (e.g., opening the secrecy envelopes, flattening the folded ballots, running them through a scanner), early votes might not be reported in the results for days or even longer after the election. Because changing vote totals seemed to always favor Democrats, this raised concerns among some Republicans even to the extent it was known that more Democrats than Republicans cast such ballots.

Before turning to an examination of the available data I need to comment on the terminology used here. As noted above, referring to “absentee” voting usually calls to mind the traditional mailed ballot. Although that would certainly count as an early vote, the term “early voting” usually refers to an in-person vote, either at the county auditor’s office or a satellite voting station. Of course, those two types of early voting still require a request for a ballot and a return. The Secretary of State’s statistics only refer to absentee voting and do not distinguish between traditional mailed ballots and in-person early voting. Unfortunately, in the discussion below I often need to make that distinction. To do so I will usually use the terms “traditional” or “mail” when referring to traditional mailed absentee ballots. I will usually use the term “in-person” or just “early voting” when referring to early voting that takes place in-person at county auditor’s offices or at satellite voting stations.

Daily Absentee Ballots Requested

Figure 1 shows the daily absentee ballot requests for the 2010 through 2020 general elections.¹⁹ The horizontal axis of Figure 1 indicates the days prior to the election. The first thing to mention about lines in Figure 1 is that they do not all start on the same

¹⁹ It is a bit inconvenient for readers, but to make the figures larger I will put them at the end of the paper rather than within the text.

number of days before the election. Through the 2016 election Iowa law allowed for absentee ballots to be mailed up to 40 days prior to an election. As of 2018 that number is 29 days. Military and overseas ballots can be mailed 45 days before an election. Requests for absentee ballots can be received up to 120 days before an election. Where the lines in Figure 1 start is just a matter of when reports on received requests start being made. Thus, we see that the lines for 2012 and 2016 begin 50 days from the election. Regardless of when the county auditors begin receiving requests and reporting them to the Secretary of State, it appears that there is some flexibility as to when to begin reporting the information for the Daily Absentee Statistics. In 2010 the statistics do not begin until 47 days from the election. For 2014 they begin 44 days out. For 2018 they begin 28 days out, which reflects the new limit for sending mailed ballots. Interestingly, the line for 2020, which charts sent ballots, starts 46 days out. Although some county auditors still noted that absentee ballots would first be mailed out on October 5 (the 29 day mark)²⁰ it seems that there was some flexibility given the pandemic. In any case, that the smallest number initially reported was 33,951 for the 2014 election we can safely assume that the requests had been accumulating for some time before the information was posted.

A second item to mention about the lines is that you will see periodic flat areas. Even though some early voting can take place on Saturdays, and even Sundays when the election nears, the posted daily reports do not include weekends. To fill these blank spots I simply repeated the data from a given Friday for the following Saturday and Sunday. This resulted in short flat areas on the lines in Figures 1 through 3.

Turning to the substance of the lines, it should come as no surprise that the absentee requests for the three presidential elections were well above those for the three midterm elections (with one slight exception for the 2014 and 2016 lines). As noted in prior papers in the series, turnout is substantially up in presidential election years. In addition, campaigns put more effort into their early voting efforts in presidential years. For comparison, in 2012 there were 741,771 requests while in 2018 there were 576,085 sent ballots and in 2014 there were 529,882. That the line for 2014 is above that for 2010 should also be no surprise. From Figure 2a of the sixth paper we saw that there has been a steady increase in absentee voting in midterm elections since 2006.

Not surprisingly, the line for 2020 is well above the lines for the other presidential years. Although there has been a general trend for increased early voting in Iowa, the jump for 2020 is certainly an outlier. The slope of the 2020 line is nearly the same as for 2012 and 2016, but it starts at a much higher number. Assuming we are past pandemic protocols by the 2022 election, I would expect the line for that year to be between the lines for 2020 and 2012.

²⁰ For example, https://dmcountyelections.iowa.gov/news/request_an_absentee_ballot_for_the_2020_general_election.

Of additional interest is that the line for 2016 is below that for 2012. Again, the general trend has been for increases in absentee and early voting so one might have expected higher numbers for 2016. The likely explanation is that it was clear fairly early on that enthusiasm for either of the two major party candidates was not as high as in 2012. This undoubtedly lessened the desire to either request an absentee ballot or to cast an early vote. Related to the enthusiasm question is that a larger than usual number of voters were probably unsure of who they would vote for until much closer to Election Day. Voters who make use of absentee or early voting are generally convinced of their choices much earlier than those who wait. Greater uncertainty regarding both of the two major party candidates (e.g., waiting for the latest news in Clinton's email scandal or the latest outrageous statement by Trump) likely caused more voters to wait until Election Day before making their choice.²¹

Given that a focus of this paper concerns the timing of the absentee requests the shapes of the lines are of particular interest. Somewhat surprisingly, all six lines are fairly straight. Because the line represents the cumulative number of requests a fairly straight line indicates that the rate of new requests during the early voting period was steady. The lines for 2010 and 2012 are a little flatter at their start, suggesting that it may have taken some time before the early voting efforts were in full swing. At the other end of the lines we do not see much if any tapering off just before the election. Although we might think that within a few days of the election voters and campaigns may be turning their focus to Election Day, that is also when there are often additional opportunities scheduled to cast an early ballot at a satellite polling station.

On a related point, keep in mind the two different types of requests indicated by these numbers. At the very beginning of each line the number of requests will primarily be for traditional absentee ballots the county auditor mails to the prospective voters. Within 40 days of the election for 2016 and before and 29 days for 2018 and after, the requests also include in-person early voting at the county auditor's office or at a satellite voting station.²²

²¹ A delay in making a choice would seem to affect early in-person voting more than traditional absentee voting. With the latter, a voter could simply request the ballot but not return it until a candidate choice was made. That said, the number of registered voters who were seriously considering not voting was likely higher than usual for the 2016 presidential election and many who were considering not voting as an option probably would not want to request a ballot.

²² Here is the Johnson County schedule of satellite voting stations for the 2014 election: https://www.johnson-county.com/dept_auditor_elections.aspx?id=15957. Notice that although some satellite stations are available quite early, the number of opportunities for early voting jumps sharply in the last three weeks before the election. In contrast, the number of early voting opportunities in 2020 was very limited compared to prior elections. Early voting was still available at the Johnson County Auditor's Office, but via a drive-up procedure.

Daily Absentee Ballots Returned

A main difference between the traditional absentee ballot procedure (mail in a request and mail back a completed ballot) and in-person early voting at the county auditor's office or a satellite voting station is that the request and return of the ballot occurs at the same time for in-person voting. That leads us to Figure 2, which repeats the six lines from Figure 1 and adds in the daily number of returned ballots for each election. Figure 2a shows the lines for the three midterm elections and Figure 2b shows the lines for the three presidential elections.²³ As with the Requested/Sent lines, the small flat areas of the Returned lines represent values from a Friday carried over to Saturday and Sunday. We also see that the beginning of the Returned lines starts later than the Requested/Sent lines for 2010, 2012, and 2016. This should be no surprise as the early requests were primarily mailed and it would take some time for them to be returned. The Returned lines for the 2014 and 2018 elections begin at the same time as the Requested/Sent lines, but this is likely just a function of reporting the requested data a bit later than in the other elections. Although the Sent and Returned lines for 2020 both start at the 46 day mark, there were very few returned ballots until the 28 day mark.

The Returned lines are not quite as straight as the Requested/Sent lines. For the elections through 2018 we see a slight bowing in the Returned lines as the slope is somewhat flat at the start of the lines but increases as it gets closer to the election. Of necessity, this bowing is due to traditional absentee ballot returns. Many voters who make an early request for a traditional absentee ballot may wait until much closer to the election before filling it out and returning it. The canvassers for campaigns who often go door to door to encourage voters to request traditional absentee ballots likely make sure that the voter supports their particular candidate, but voters may still delay completing the ballots and sending them back if they remain undecided regarding races other than the main ones or other ballot items (e.g., local races that may be nonpartisan, bond issues).

The most interesting part of the Returned lines is that they never meet the Requested/Sent lines. In other words, some of the voters who have been mailed absentee ballots never return them. Some of the gap between Requested/Sent and Returned ballots will be due to voters who choose to bring their absentee ballot with them to the polls on Election Day, but that number is likely small.²⁴ Thus, a fair number of people choose not to vote even after requesting a ballot.

²³ Note that the vertical scale for the two parts of Figure 2 is not the same. This makes comparisons between the two parts of the figure a bit more difficult, but easier to see the differences between the same types of elections.

²⁴ Some ballots that are returned may not be counted if the ballot is "spoiled" in some way or, as indicated previously, arrives late. Again, however, the number of returned ballots that are not counted for technical reasons is likely small.

The reasons for not returning a ballot will vary. Aside from those who mailed the ballot back too late, some may have just forgotten to send it back. Others may have simply chosen to not vote. One might wonder why a person would request a ballot and then decide not to send it back. Here again, the reasons can vary. Some might have requested the ballot just to get the canvasser to go away. (Seriously, some of those soliciting absentee ballot requests can be pretty persistent!) Others may have simply changed their minds regarding the candidates or races.

Although I will come back to the issue of ballots that were not returned, let me first turn to the number of requested or sent and returned ballots by party.

Daily Absentee Ballots Requested and Returned by Party

Figure 3 is divided into six parts, one for each of the six elections examined here. Each of the six parts separates the number of absentee ballots requested or sent and returned by party: Democrat, Republican, and No Party (which includes Other voters as well). The vertical scale for each of the first five parts of Figure 3 is the same. This allows for a better comparison of the five elections. The scale for 2020 is different given the sharp increase in the number of early votes, but for now I will consider it an outlier and not adjust the vertical scale for the other elections.

Figure 3a shows the party Requested/Sent and Returned lines for the 2010 midterm election. It is no particular surprise that the lines are fairly close together for this election. As noted in previous papers, both turnout and absentee ballot requests or sent ballots are lower in midterm elections.²⁵ We might not expect the use of absentee voting to necessarily decrease in midterm years given that those who vote in such elections are generally considered more reliable voters, but without a unifying presidential campaign – and the resources that come with it – the early vote effort is not as extensive.

Despite the closeness of the lines in Figure 3a notice that none of the Requested lines cross, nor do any of the Returned lines. In other words, the lines for Democrats are always above those for Republicans, which are always above those for No Party voters. Democrats took an early lead in requests and held it throughout the early voting period. Republicans closed the gap to about 28,000 with 25 days to go before the election, narrowed it a bit more to about 22,000 by day 18, but were not able to get any closer as the gap widen again to over 29,000 by Election Day. Both Republican and No Party requests started slowly, with Republicans only slightly ahead. At about a month before the election the Republican early voting effort kicked in and their requests increased dramatically creating a clear separation from the No Party requests.

²⁵ See, in particular, Figures 1 and 2 of the sixth paper in the series.

The Returned lines for all three parties show the slightly bowed feature we saw in Figure 2 in that they increase more slowly than the Requested lines near the beginning of the early voting period, but then increase more quickly as the election nears. As we would expect, the much larger number of requests and resulting returns by Democrats and Republicans meant that their Returned lines crossed even the Requested line for No Party voters well before the election. For the Democrats this occurred with about four weeks to go and for Republicans with about three weeks left. It was not until just a day before the election that the returns for Democrats pulled ahead of the requests for Republicans.

The last item to notice in Figure 3a is that the final gap between the Requested and Returned lines we saw in Figure 2 is present here for all three parties. We would expect the gap to vary among the parties, but I will examine the party gaps in a bit more detail after considering the daily statistics for the remaining elections.

Turning to Figure 3b we see the daily Requested and Returned lines of the three parties for the 2012 presidential election. Consistent with what we saw in Figure 2 the number of requested and returned ballots is much larger than in 2010 for all three parties. Democrats emphasized their early voting effort and it shows in the large lead they had at the start of the early voting period. Another interesting aspect of this is that the number of requests from No Party voters was also above that from Republicans for the first two weeks of data. Again, this generally reflects the effort by Democrats to identify No Party voters who supported President Obama.

At the start of the period Democrats had about 80,000 more requests than Republicans. Republicans only closed to within about 68,000 by day 25, but Democrats eventually widened their lead back to over 83,000 by Election Day. As noted, No Party requests started ahead of those by Republicans. Republican requests surpassed those of No Party voters by day 35, but the eventual gap between the two was much closer than for the 2010 election.

Given the much larger number of requests from Democrats it is not surprising that the Democrats' Returned line crosses the Requested lines for Republicans and No Party voters much more quickly than it did in 2010. Also interesting regarding the Democrats' Returned line is the surge at about five weeks from the election. It was at this time that the Democrats' Returned line crossed the Requested line for No Party voters and would have crossed the Requested line for Republicans as well had there not been a surge in Republican requests at about the same time.

Once again, in 2012 we see a gap between the Requested and Returned lines for each of the parties. Given the larger numbers involved we can also see a clear distinction between the gaps in that the largest belongs to Democrats and the smallest to Republicans. Again, more on this below.

Figure 3c shows the Sent and Returned lines of the three parties for the 2014 election. As we saw in Figure 2, although the numbers are below those of 2012 for this midterm election they are still well above those for 2010. Overall there were about 40,000 more sent ballots for both Democrats and No Party voters, but about 50,000 more for Republicans. The gap between the Sent lines for Democrats and Republicans was not as large as in 2010 and even closed to less than 10,000 on day 19 before widening again. Despite the increase in No party requests compared to 2010, the larger increase for Republicans meant that the gap between them widened.

The data for returned ballots for this election begins the same day as the sent ballot data, so the Returned lines for all three parties are bunched together during the first few days (and Republicans actually had more returns for the first two days of reporting). As expected, the Democrats' Returned line quickly moved above those for Republicans and No Party voters. What was unexpected, however, was that the number of Republican returns actually pulled ahead of that of Democrats on day 13 (though you cannot see it on the chart). The difference was only 363 ballots, and the lead only lasted one day, but it was certainly something noticed by those who were keeping a close eye on the daily statistics. Although the Returned line for Democrats then pulled ahead of the Republican line for the remainder of the early voting period, it is interesting to note that it never went ahead of the Republican Sent line. In other words, the gap between the Democrats' Sent and Returned lines was greater than that between the Democrats' and Republicans' Sent lines. In addition, although the overall numbers are lower than in 2012, in Figure 3c we can again see that the gap between the Republicans' Sent and Returned lines is smaller than that for either Democrats or No Party voters.

Figure 3d shows the Sent and Returned lines for the 2016 election. As expected, the lines for this presidential election are higher than they were for the 2014 midterm election. They are, however, mostly below those for the 2012 presidential election. As noted previously, this runs counter to the trend of increasing numbers of absentee and early voters. The sent ballots for Democrats were down by just under 30,000. No Party requests also decreased by about 28,400.²⁶ In sharp contrast, Republican sent ballots were up by nearly 6,500. Of additional interest, although I have combined the Other and No Party categories, sent ballots for Other voters (those in the Libertarian and Green Non-Party Political Organizations) were actually up in 2016 as well. There were 999 Other requests in 2012, but 2,657 sent ballots in 2016.

As noted previously, the decrease in requests from Democrats and No Party voters can be easily explained from the general lack of enthusiasm for the major party candidates.

²⁶ A reminder that these comparisons are a little bit "apples and oranges" given that there was no Sent category for the 2010 and 2012 absentee data. Even so, the difference between the requested ballots for those two earlier elections and the actual sent ballots was likely small.

The increase in requests from voters in the Other category can also be attributed largely to that lack of enthusiasm and the resulting increase in interest in the Libertarian and Green Party candidates. Of course, the lack of enthusiasm does not explain the increase in Republican absentee requests and early voting. This is particularly so given the widely acknowledged lack of a traditional Trump campaign organization. I suspect that the same two factors that resulted in an Iowa victory for Trump in the general election also contributed to the increase in Republican requests. First, it seems that most observers overstated the efficacy of the Clinton campaign organization and understated that of Trump. Second, the Republican Party of Iowa was never as hostile to Trump as other state party organizations. That made it much easier for the state party and county organizations to fill in the gaps left by the Trump campaign in terms of get out the vote efforts.

Before moving on from Figure 3d it is also worth pointing out the differences between the requested and returned ballots for each party. A quick visual inspection of the differences between each pair of party lines suggests that Republicans had the fewest non-returned ballots, followed by the No Party voters, with Democrats having the largest gap. In terms of raw numbers, this was essentially the same pattern observed for the prior three elections.

Figure 3e shows the Sent and Returned lines for the parties in the 2018 election. The first thing to notice is that it looks like I made a mistake in formatting the chart given that the lines start at about the middle of the box. I thought I made a mistake with it at first too, but remember that for the 2018 election absentee ballots could not be mailed out (or early voting begin) until 29 days before the election. That meant that the first reports were posted 28 days before the election. In addition, the reports on sent ballots started at the same time, so all the lines begin at the same point. Of course, I could have adjusted the horizontal scale to begin at 29 days rather than 50, but I kept the scale used for the other portions of Figure 3 to make comparisons easier.²⁷

Despite the shortened time period, and with allowances for the increased number of absentee ballots, the slopes of the lines do not appear too different from those of the 2014 midterm. With only a few exceptions, the sent lines for all three parties start at a higher number than prior elections. This is not surprising given that the time for requesting absentee ballots (120 days before the election) did not change. Thus, more requests accumulated before the ballots could be mailed and early voting was available.

Comparing the Sent and Returned lines for each party we see the same bowing as in prior elections. The bowing is most pronounced for Republicans and a bit less so for No Party voters. For Democrats, the bowing really does not occur until days 16 to 11. Interestingly, despite having requests far above that of Republicans or No Party voters,

²⁷ That's my story and I'm sticking to it.

Democrats seemed to lag behind the other two parties in terms of their percentage of returned ballots during the first week of the period. This changed dramatically from day 23 to day 18 when a sharp increase in the number of returned ballots for Democrats surpassed even the number of sent ballots for No Party voters.

That period from day 23 to day 18 also produced a sharp increase in the number of sent ballots by Democrats (though less than the number of returned ballots for the week) and an even sharper increase for Republican sent ballots (with a corresponding sharp increase in Republican returned ballots even if fewer than Democrats). The sharp increases this week help to explain the jump in the 2018 line in Figure 1. Recall from Figure 1 how the 2018 Sent line was nearly equal to the 2010 line for the first week of the period, but then had a sharp jump in the second week so that it then followed the 2014 line until eventually surpassing it for good with a little over a week to go before the election.

In terms of the gaps between the Sent and Returned lines we again see that the gap between Republicans is the smallest followed by that of No Party voters and then Democrats.

Figure 3f shows the Sent and Returned lines for the 2020 election. The first thing to note is that there was such a large increase in the number of sent ballots that that scale of this chart had to be adjusted. As noted previously, the posted statistics show sent and returned ballots well before the 29-day limit. Given the scale of the chart, the lines for returned ballots are barely visible until day 29. The push for voters to use mail-in voting meant that there was a large number of sent ballots by the time statistics began to be posted. Not surprisingly, Democrats had by far the largest number of sent ballots. The Sent lines for No Party voters and Republicans were fairly straight the entire period, meaning a steady stream of requests and then sent ballots. In contrast, the cumulative number of ballots sent to Democrats increased fairly quickly between days 44 and 34. The slope of the line decreased a bit after that, but was still larger than that of either Republicans or No Party voters.

The slopes of the three Returned lines are also quite different from those of prior elections. The bowing effect seen in prior charts is absent here.²⁸ The Returned lines for Republicans and No Party voters are almost straight. The line for Democrats actually curves in the opposite direction. Once ballots were officially being recognized as returned there was a huge jump in how many Democrats returned them. This lasted from day 29 to day 18. At that point the number tapered off a bit even though the slope was still larger than that of Republicans or No Party voters.

²⁸ Given that some ballots were listed as returned on the first report at day 46 one might argue that there is a bit of a bowing effect, though quite different from what we had seen before. It seems, however, that official logging of returned ballots did not begin until day 29 and it is from that point that the Returned lines are visible.

At this point we can turn to a closer examination of these gaps.

Differences in the Requested and Returned/Sent Lines

During most of the early voting period we expect that returned absentee ballots will lag behind the number of requests or sent ballots. As Election Day approaches the pace of returned ballots will pick up, which is what caused the Returned lines to appear somewhat bowed for all but 2020 in Figures 2 and 3. We also noticed in Figures 2 and 3 that the final gap between the number of requested ballots and those returned remained fairly large. Although the gap existed in all six elections for all three parties, we also noticed some size differences.

Figure 4 plots the percentage of returned ballots for each of the three parties for each of the six elections examined. Despite only having six elections to examine, there are still some interesting aspects to these percentages. The first is that the percentage of returned ballots is higher in all three presidential elections than in the 2010 and 2014 midterm elections.²⁹ This result is similar to what we saw in previous papers regarding turnout in general, which was just about 17% higher in presidential versus midterm elections.³⁰ The presidential-midterm difference is much smaller for returned ballots, however, given that the average overall return percentage in the three midterm elections is only about four percent below the presidential elections. In addition, the return percentages are certainly much higher than the turnout averages. Where the overall turnout averages for the general elections since 2000 was about 67%³¹, the overall returned ballot percentage for the six elections examined here was 92.11%.³² That the returned percentages are much higher than the turnout percentages is not surprising. Requesting a ballot is something that requires a bit of effort and must be done for each election. That effort and the tangible ballot that arrives likely represent more of a commitment and reminder to vote than a voter registration card tucked away somewhere.

²⁹ The percentage of returned ballots for 2018 was slightly higher than the 2012 returned percentage for all three parties. This is likely the result of there being more interest in the election and a general upward trend in the use and return of absentee ballots.

³⁰ See Figure 1 of the second paper in the series for specific percentages of the general elections examined since 2000.

³¹ I wanted to delete the footnote that was here but Word is refusing to let me do so. Rather than have the footnote numbers skip a number I am entering this comment as a placeholder until I can get Word to cooperate (and if you are reading this I was unsuccessful).

³² Again, see the second paper in the series for more details. The overall turnout for the 2010 through 2018 elections was 62.27%.

The second thing to notice is that the drop for the 2018 midterm is quite small for Democrats and No Party voters and, as noted above, actually increases slightly for Republicans over the 2016 percentage (95.83% versus 95.66%).

The third thing to notice is that all three parties had their highest returned percentage for the 2020 election. This is actually somewhat remarkable. The push to get voters to request mail-in ballots and the huge increase in requests that resulted likely included a fair number of less reliable voters. Possibly recognizing this as a concern, government officials and the political parties worked very hard to get voters to properly return their absentee ballots on time. Those efforts were apparently successful.

The fourth thing to notice about the percentages in Figure 4 is that the ordering of the parties is also similar to the turnout pattern we saw for the general elections. In Figure 3 of the second paper in the series we saw that Republicans consistently had the highest turnout percentages, No Party voters the lowest, and Democrats always between the other two. Although the vertical scale on Figure 4 is not the same as that of Figure 3 from the second paper, we can see from the percentages at the bottom of each figure that the differences between Democrats and Republicans are roughly the same for returned ballots as for turnout in general. No Party voters provide the main difference from the general turnout pattern in that their returned percentage is much closer to that of Democrats than is the case for turnout. Again, although No Party voters may not be as reliable in general, having made the commitment to vote by requesting an absentee ballot they are more likely to follow through.

As always, just looking at percentages does not tell the whole story. The two parts of Figure 5 show the numbers of absentee ballots requested and returned by party for the six elections. This figure essentially converts the Election Day data from the six parts of Figure 3 into columns for easier comparison.

Despite the higher returned percentages for Republicans shown in Figure 4, the much larger number of requests by Democrats means their number of returned ballots was still well above that of Republicans for all six elections. The difference was much closer for the three midterm elections, particularly in 2014. It is also noteworthy that all three parties substantially increased their number of absentee voters in each of the three midterm elections. Of course, the number of absentee ballots requested and returned for the three presidential elections were much larger than for either of the midterms.³³ In fact, over half of all registered Democrats cast an absentee ballot in presidential elections since 2012.³⁴ As noted previously, more resources tend to be available for absentee and early voting efforts in presidential years. In addition, Democrats placed particular emphasis on early voting in 2012 as a way to counter what was perceived as a

³³ Note that the vertical scale for the two parts of Figure 5 is not the same.

³⁴ See Figure 3 of the sixth paper in the series.

lower level of enthusiasm relative to the 2008 campaign. There was not as much enthusiasm present for 2016, but for 2020 a combination of the general emphasis on absentee voting due to the pandemic and an anti-Trump fervor caused a huge surge in Democrats' absentee voting.

Concluding Comments

There are three remaining points to mention. The first concerns the distribution between mailed absentee ballots and in-person early voting. This distribution is important because it gives us a better understanding of the reasons for the gap between requested and returned ballots. That knowledge, in turn, will aid campaigns and election officials in developing approaches to reducing that gap.

Recall from the prior discussion that there are some technical reasons a returned ballot might not be counted, regardless of whether it was submitted via mail or by an in-person vote. These include a problem with the signature or address on the affidavit envelope (which contains the security envelope with the ballot). Although such problems are more likely to occur with ballots returned by mail because a poll worker was not present to assist the voter, they can also occur with in-person early ballots. Another problem that can result in an early ballot not being counted is if the voter dies between the time of returning the ballot and Election Day. Though (hopefully!) rare, such deaths do happen and ballots cast by voters who died before Election Day cannot be counted.³⁵

On the other hand, technical problems that affect only ballots returned by mail are those that arrive too late or arrive after Election Day without a postmark indicating they were mailed on time. Aside from the technical reasons a returned ballot might not be counted, some mailed absentee ballots simply will not be returned by the voter for one reason or another.

As I noted previously, one practical difference between early voting by mail versus in-person is that with in-person voting the ballot is effectively returned at the same time it is requested. Given the small number of in-person ballots that are requested but not counted for technical reasons, the vast majority of the difference between requested and returned ballots comes from the traditional mailed ballots.

Unfortunately, the data provided on the Secretary of State's website do not distinguish between the two types of early ballots. On the other hand, the Johnson County Auditor's website does break down the different types of early ballots.³⁶ Although

³⁵ Insert obligatory joke about voting in Chicago/Illinois here.

³⁶ My thanks to John Deeth and other members of the Johnson County Auditor's office who discussed with me how absentee ballots are handled and counted.

Johnson County should not be considered representative of Iowa as a whole, a quick look at statistics for the same six elections examined in this paper shows that mailed ballots accounted for 57.3% of all early votes in 2020, 39.1% in 2018, 36.2% in 2016, 59.5% in 2014, 46.2% in 2012, and 46.0% in 2010.³⁷ Quite frankly, even considering 2020 as an outlier these are higher percentages than I expected, particularly given the large number of in-person early voting opportunities provided in Johnson County. Because mailed ballots naturally have a higher percentage of unreturned ballots, a larger amount of mailed ballots means the percentage of unreturned mail ballots pushes the overall (meaning mailed and in-person) unreturned percentage up. For Johnson County, however, the low unreturned rate on mailed ballots means the overall unreturned percentage of 1.27% in 2020 was below the state average (see Figure 4).³⁸

Regardless of the specific percentage of mailed ballots, there are certainly enough of them not returned that campaigns need to focus on making sure those requesting mailed ballots return them in time. Campaigns usually have “chasers” who track the requests and returned ballots. Of course, having people first work to obtain the requests and then track them later takes a substantial effort. It is often easier for campaigns to publicize satellite voting stations and direct people to them. Still, if a campaign has emphasized mailed ballot requests it should plan to follow up to be sure votes are not lost due to unreturned ballots.

The second point to mention involves the question of whether the various ways of voting early actually increase turnout or do they simply “cannibalize” Election Day turnout. The data presented here do not address that question in any conclusive way, but the answer is likely some combination of the two. As noted in prior papers, turnout in Iowa has remained fairly steady while the percentage of absentee voting has steadily increased, which suggests more of the cannibalizing aspect. Regardless of the extent to which absentee voting efforts increase turnout, there is certainly value in making sure supporters cast a ballot. Early votes cast by supporters allow campaigns to focus their Election Day get out the vote efforts on a smaller number of people – members of their party and identified supporters who have not yet voted. In addition, early votes minimize the amount of damage an “October surprise” of one sort or another can do to

³⁷ Links to the Johnson County Auditor’s Early Voting Statistics for the six elections can be found as follows: 2020 (<https://www.johnsoncountyiowa.gov/auditor/returns/2020-11-absenteeStats.htm>), 2018 (<https://www.johnson-county.com/auditor/returns/2018GeneralEarlyVotingStats.htm>), 2016 (<http://www.johnson-county.com/auditor/returns/1611abstats.htm>), 2014 (http://www.johnson-county.com/dept_auditor.aspx?id=16018), 2012 (<http://www.johnson-county.com/auditor/returns/1211stat.htm>), and 2010 (<http://www.johnson-county.com/auditor/returns/1011stat.htm>).

³⁸ Based on the data provided at the links in the prior footnote, the percentage of unreturned mailed ballots in Johnson County was 2.01% in 2020, 7.5% in 2018, 7.4% in 2016, 15.6% in 2014, 8.4% in 2012, and 12.7% in 2010.

a campaign.³⁹ Thus, rather than thinking about “winning” the early voting game, campaigns should just see it as an additional method of getting as many votes as possible.

The final point to mention once again concerns the results for 2020. Reactions to the pandemic greatly reduced the number of in-person events and activities. There was no serious suggestion that the election should be cancelled, but there was a desire to reduce the number of people voting at polling stations on Election Day. There is no question that the emphasis on absentee voting, particularly for mailed ballots, caused a dramatic increase in the number of voters using them. With vaccines starting to be distributed in December 2020, it would seem that we might be back to normal by the 2022 election. If we are, will efforts used to increase mailed ballots in 2020 be abandoned in later elections? For example, for both the primary and general election in 2020 the Iowa Secretary of State mailed an absentee ballot request form to every active registered voter in the state. Will this now be considered the norm even if it is not needed as a means to decrease in-person voting? If such ballots are not mailed out on a state-wide level, will some County Auditors take it upon themselves to mail request forms to voters in their counties as they did in 2020? If only some Auditors do this will the political parties step up to send such requests to voters in other counties? Might we end up with voters receiving multiple request forms as occurred in 2020 (and which likely caused the much larger than usual difference in the number of requests versus sent ballots)? The 2020 election was clearly an outlier relative to the prior five elections. The answers to these questions will determine whether it was an outlier going forward or the first indication of a new normal for voting in Iowa.

³⁹ For those not familiar with the term, the notion of an “October surprise” is something that happens within a few weeks of Election Day that hurts that candidate’s chances. This could be some devastating piece of opposition research or a gaffe from which the candidate does not have time to recover before Election Day.

Figure 1: Cumulative Total Absentee Ballots Requested/Sent by Number of Days Prior to Election Since 2010

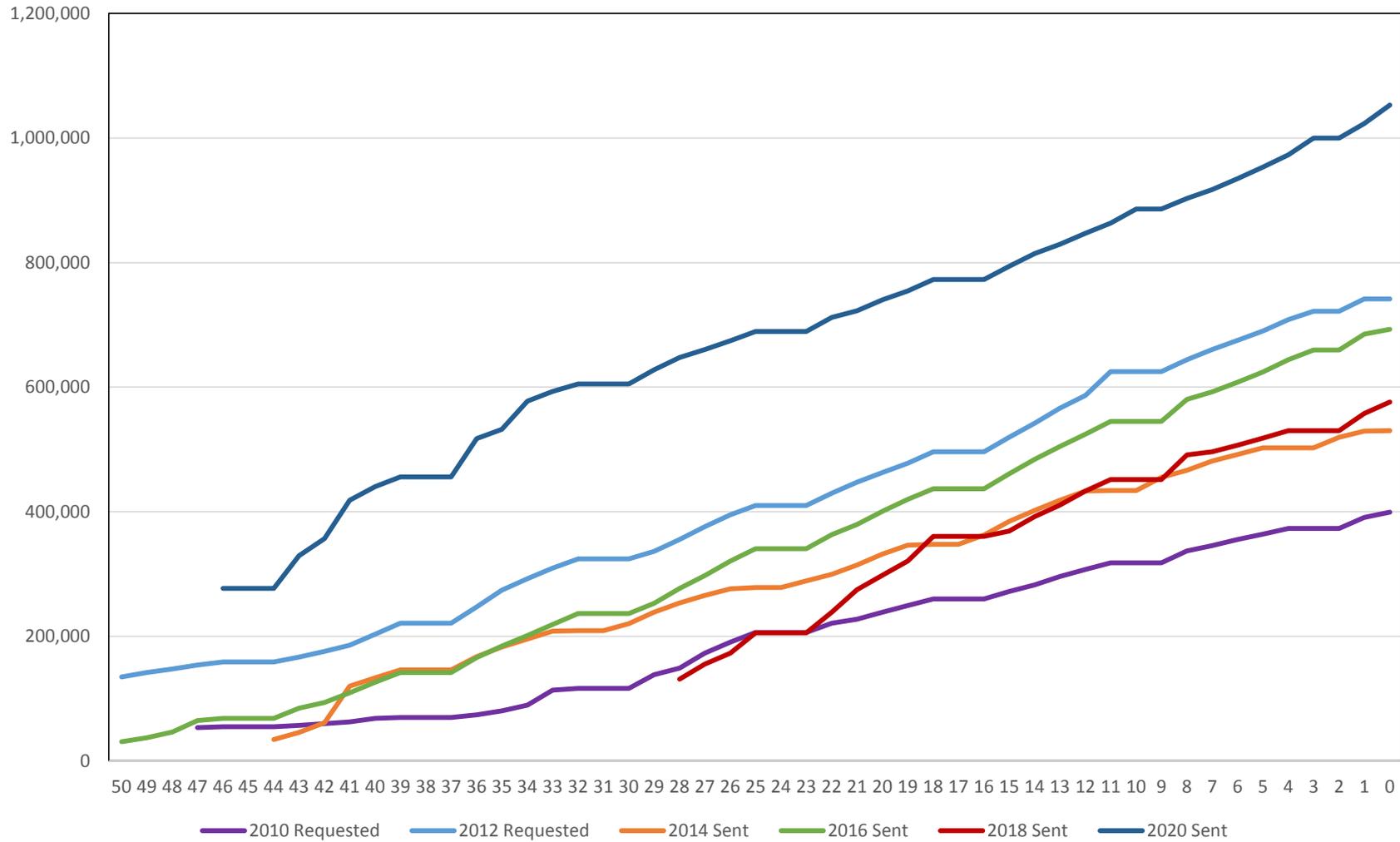


Figure 2a: Cumulative Total Absentee Ballots Requested/Sent and Returned by Number of Days Prior to Midterm Elections Since 2010

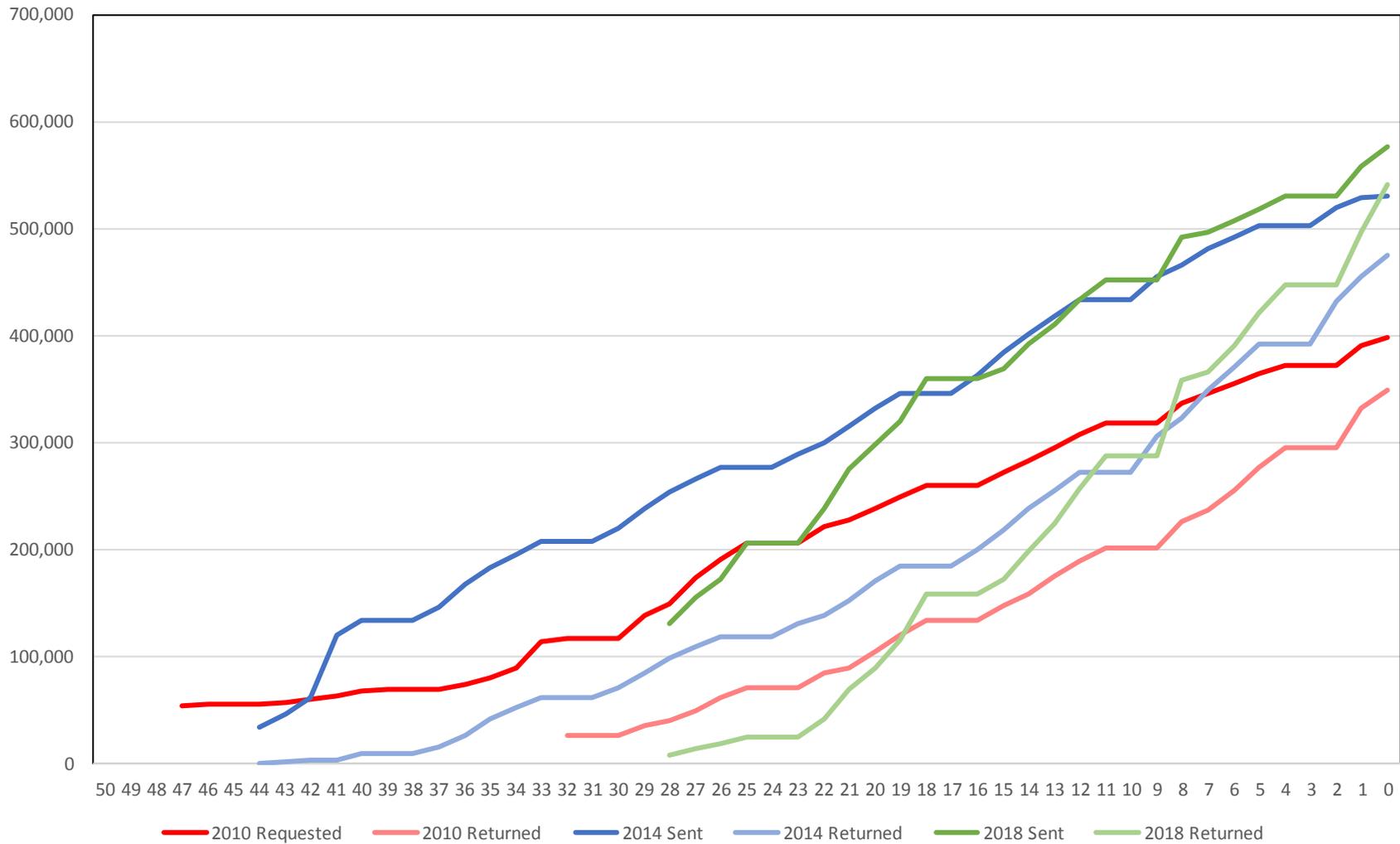


Figure 2b: Cumulative Total Absentee Ballots Requested/Sent and Returned by Number of Days Prior to Presidential Elections Since 2012

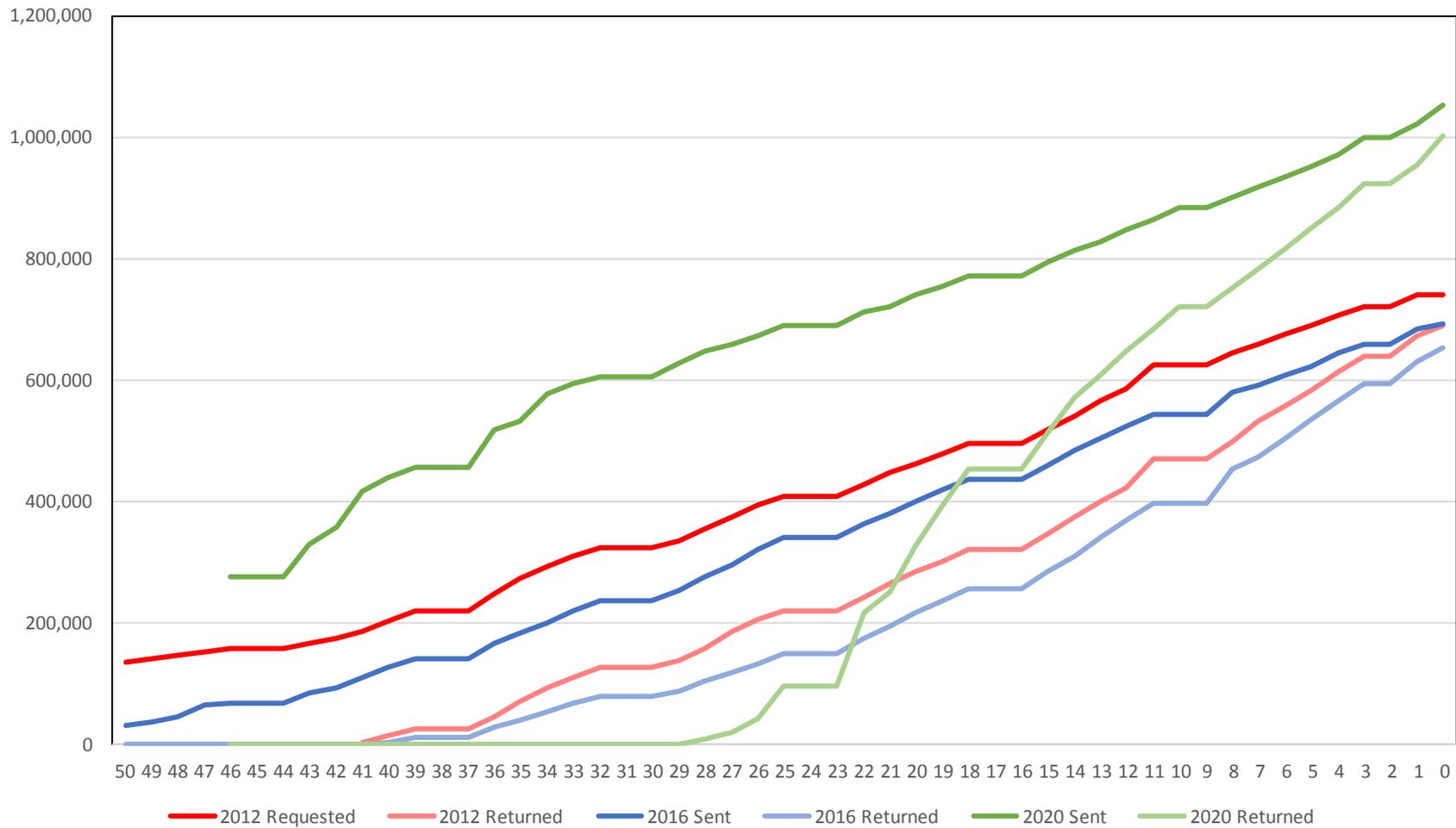


Figure 3a: Cumulative Total Absentee Ballots Requested and Returned by Party and Number of Days Prior to 2010 Election

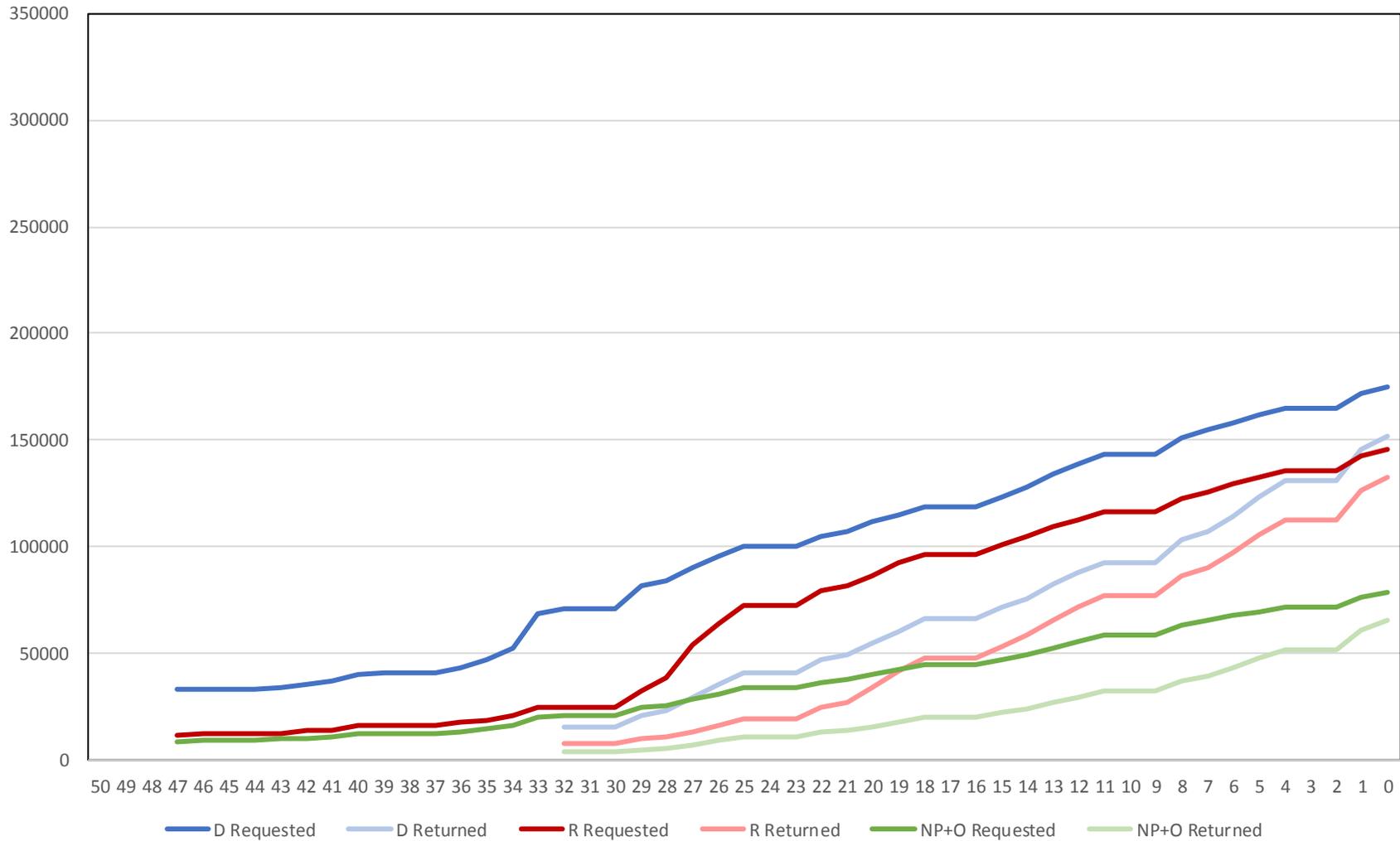


Figure 3b: Cumulative Total Absentee Ballots Requested and Returned by Party and Number of Days Prior to 2012 Election

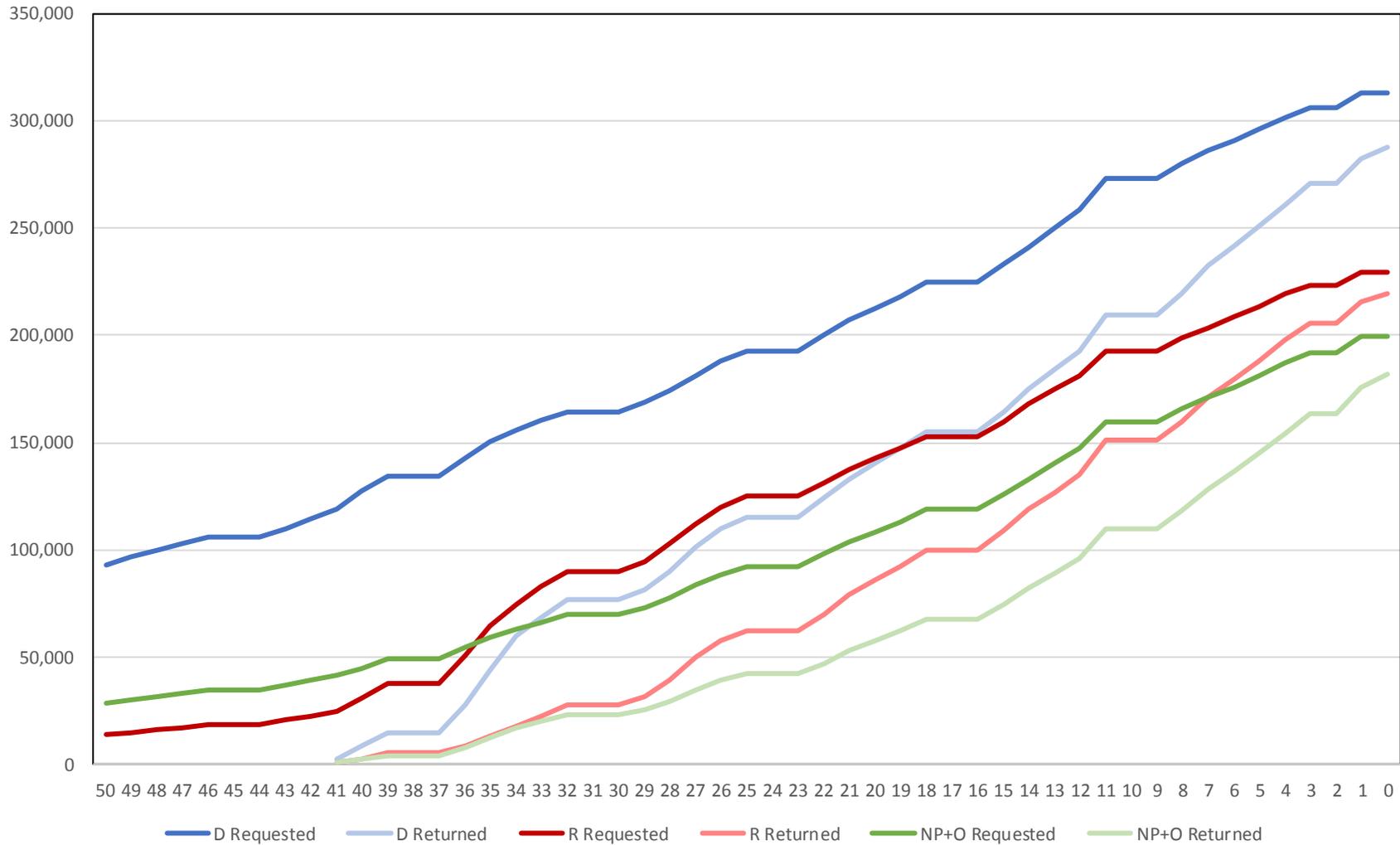


Figure 3c: Cumulative Total Absentee Ballots Sent and Returned by Party and Number of Days Prior to 2014 Election

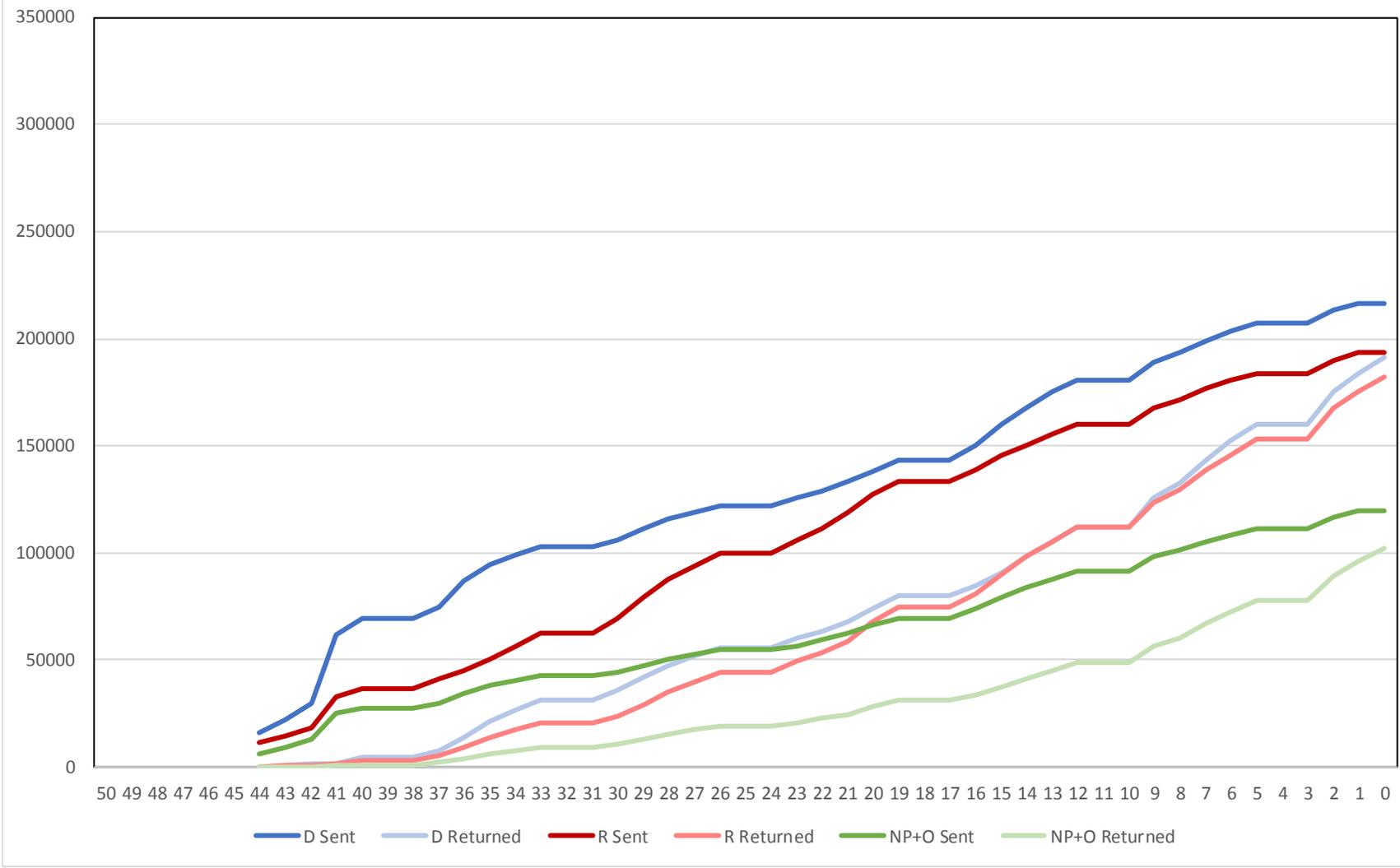


Figure 3d: Cumulative Total Absentee Ballots Sent and Returned by Party and Number of Days Prior to 2016 Election

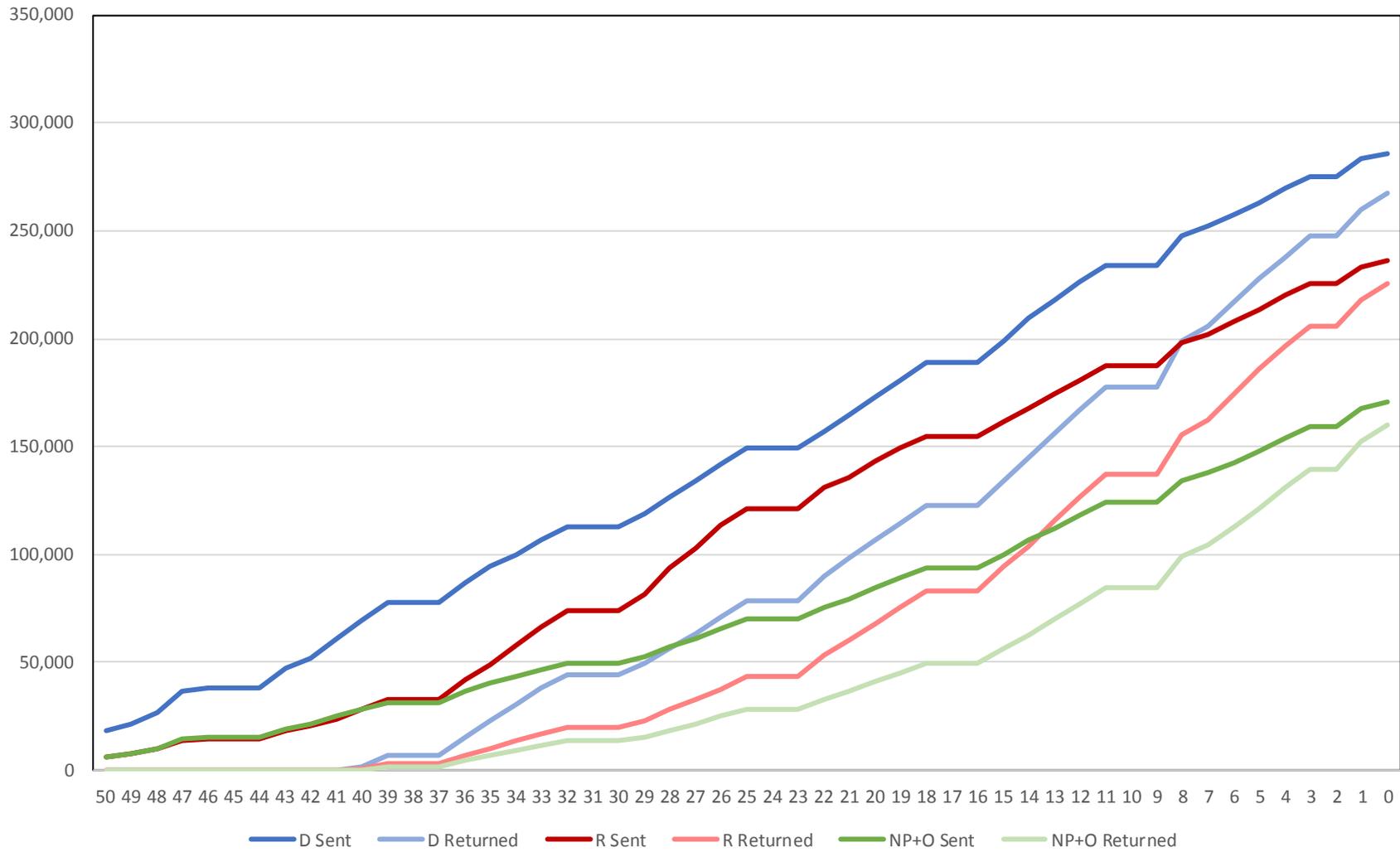


Figure 3e: Cumulative Total Absentee Ballots Sent and Returned by Party and Number of Days Prior to 2018 Election

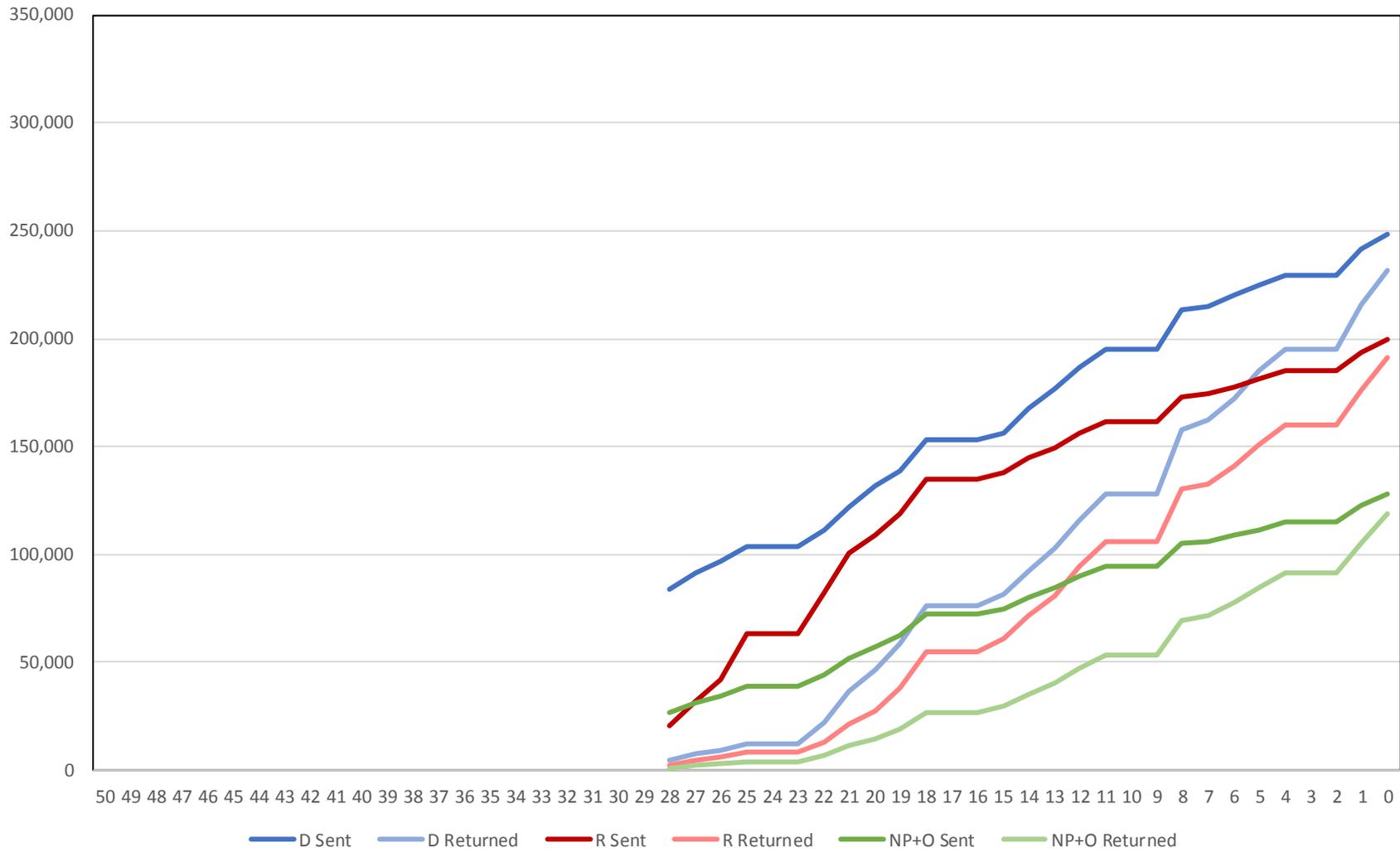


Figure 3f: Cumulative Total Absentee Ballots Sent and Returned by Party and Number of Days Prior to 2020 Election

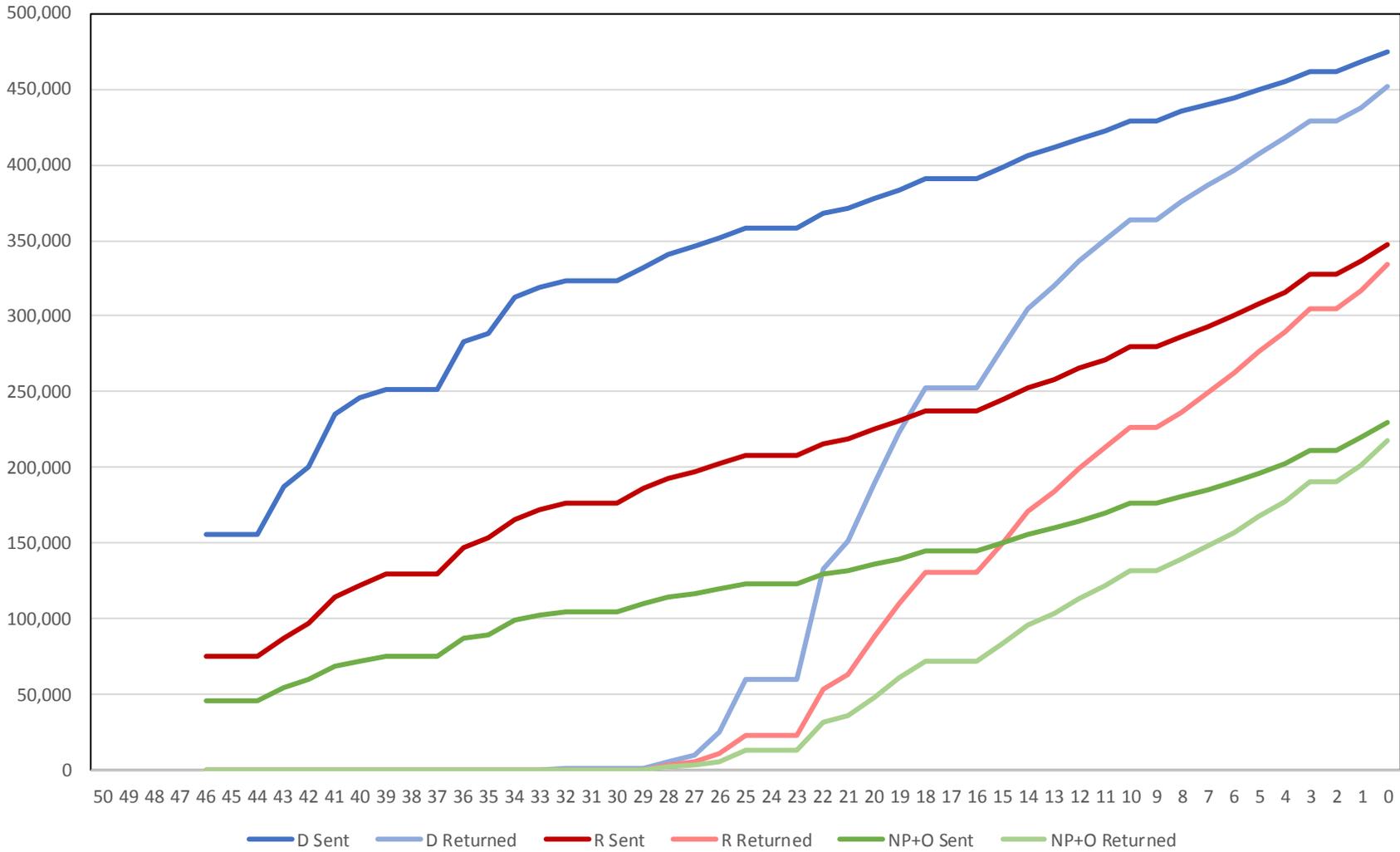
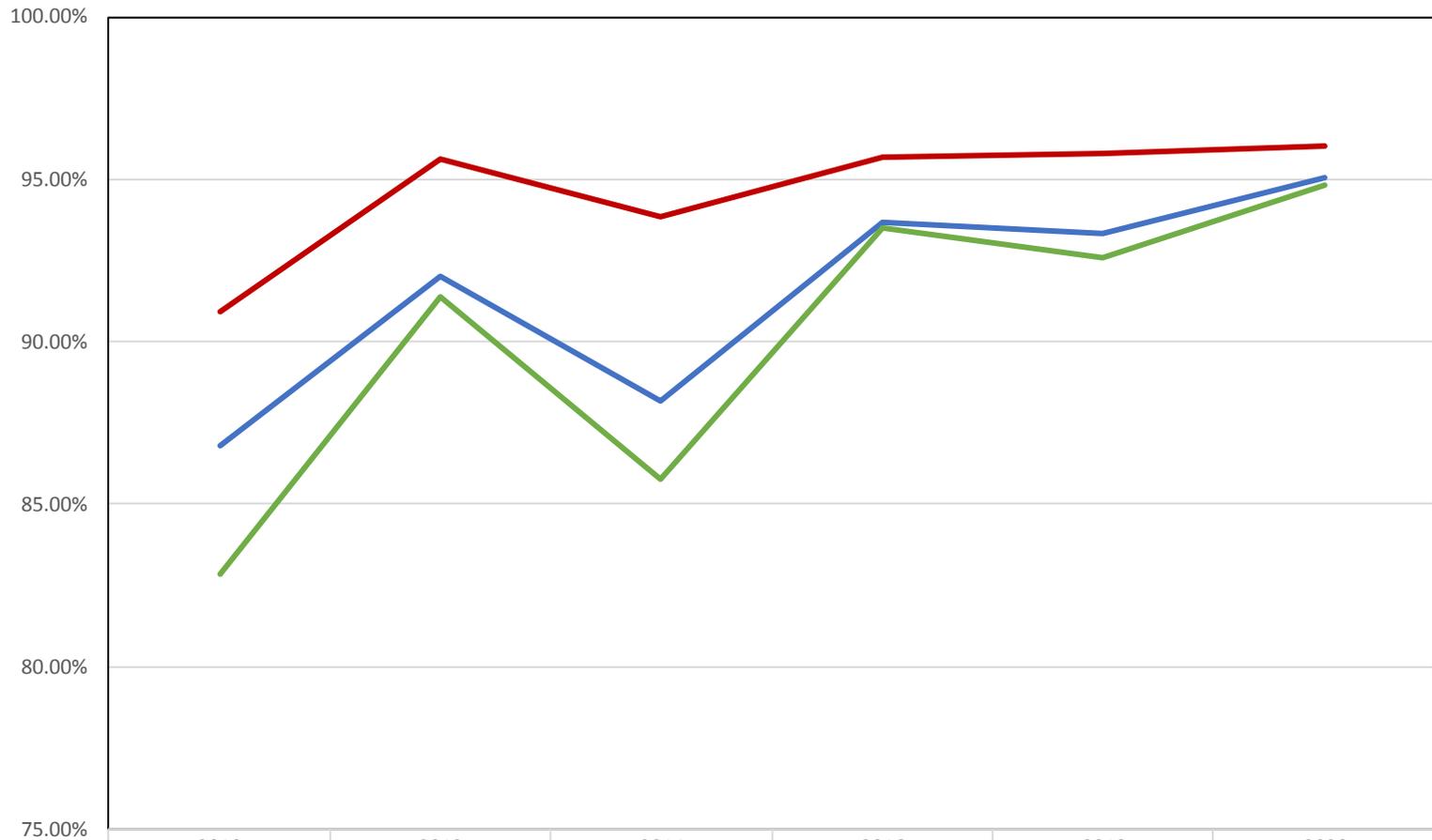


Figure 4: Percent of Returned Absentee Ballots by Party in Elections Since 2010



	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020
Democrat	86.80%	92.04%	88.17%	93.67%	93.31%	95.03%
Republican	90.92%	95.64%	93.86%	95.66%	95.83%	96.05%
No Party + Other	82.87%	91.38%	85.80%	93.50%	92.59%	94.81%

Figure 5a: Number of Returned and Unreturned Absentee Ballots by Party in Midterm Elections Since 2010

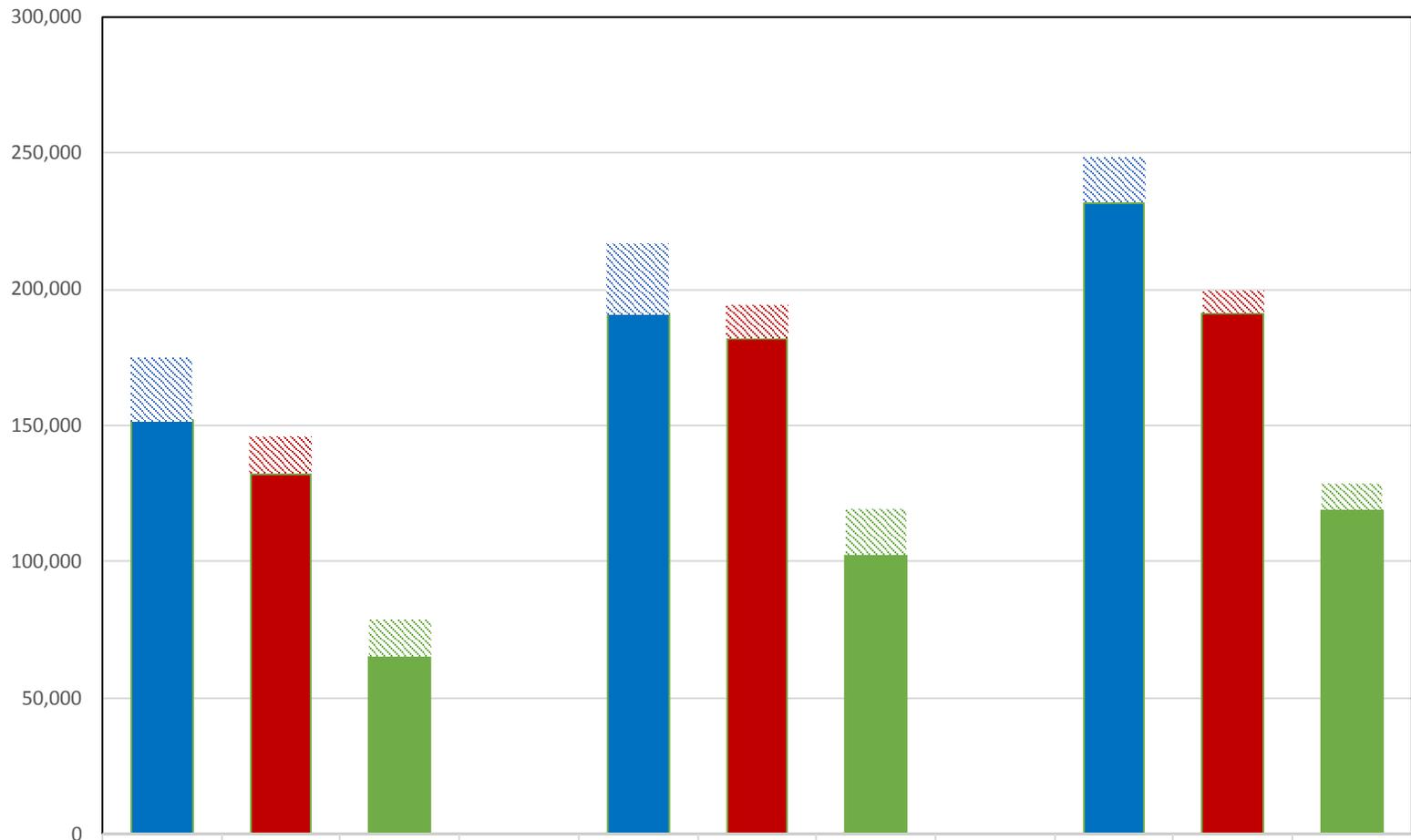


Figure 5b: Number of Returned and Unreturned Absentee Ballots by Party in Presidential Elections Since 2012

