

A Study of Early Voting in Ohio Elections

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Executive Summary

This report explores the phenomenon of early voting in Ohio elections, with a special emphasis on 2010, using official statistics from the Ohio Secretary of State and survey data from the Akron Buckeye Poll. It seeks to answer the following questions: How prevalent has early voting been in Ohio? What were the patterns of early voting across the state? When and why did voters cast a ballot early? What role did the electoral and political process have in early voting? What are the demographic characteristics of early voters? And what was the impact of early voting on election results?

We find that early voting has become more prevalent since 2006, with more than one-quarter of Ohio voters casting their ballots early in the 2010 election. We also find that there was a geographic pattern to early voting, with central and northeastern Ohio (especially the Columbus and Cleveland areas) having more early voters than other parts of the state. In 2010, convenience was the most common reason that voters cast a ballot early. In addition, early voters expressed less confidence in the electoral process, reported less campaign contact, and were more likely to be strong Democrats than election-day voters. In terms of demographic characteristics, early voters were more likely than election-day voters to be women, older, and of lower income and education attainment. Finally, early voters appear to have favored

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Democratic candidates in 2010 and 2006, while election-day voters favored Republican candidates.

Taken together, these findings suggest that early voting in Ohio is growing in importance, but is closely tied to the logistics of getting to the polls. In turn, such logistics are less connected to the electoral or political process than to demographic characteristics. Voters for whom election-day voting is less convenient have tended to be older and lower-status women. Such voters were also more likely to be Democrats. As a consequence, early voting on balance favored Democratic candidates compared to election-day voting.

How prevalent has Early Voting been in Ohio?

Early voting has become more common in Ohio since “no fault absentee” voting was instituted in 2005.² Table 1 shows the numbers of early voters in the 2006, 2008 and 2010 elections, and for the purpose of comparison, the absentee ballots in 2002 and 2004.³

Table 1: Early Voting in Ohio, 2006, 2008, and 2010 (plus absentee votes in 2002, 2004)

<i>Year</i>	<i>Number Absentee Voters</i>	<i>% of Registered Voters</i>	<i>% of Vote Cast</i>
2002	229,512	3.2%	6.8%
2004	607,636	7.6%	10.6%
2006	639,416	8.1%	15.3%
2008	1,717,256	20.7%	29.7%
2010	1,021,865	12.7%	25.8%

Source: Ohio Secretary of State

² In 2005, Ohio election law was changed to allow voters to request an absentee ballot without stating a reason (hence “no-fault”). This change allowed for greater opportunity for voters to cast absentee ballots—that is to “vote early.” Some voters choose to cast an absentee ballot in person at a Board of Elections or other site designated by the Board of Elections.

³ Table 1 reports absentee ballots that were actually counted by boards of election; such votes accounted for 98.5 percent of the absentee ballots returned to board of elections.

Table 1 reveals that in 2006 there were 639,416 early voters, which accounted for 9.0% of all registered voters in Ohio and 16.9% of the vote cast. In 2008, early voters increased to 1,717,256, or 20.7% of registered voters and 30.2% of the vote cast. And in 2010, there were 1,021,865, 13.8% of registered voters and 28.2% of the vote cast.

The figures for 2002 (229,512 absentee voters, 3.2% of registered voters and 6.8% of the vote cast) and 2004 (607,636 absentee voters, 7.6% of registered voters and 10.6% of the vote cast) reveal that “no-fault” absentee voting increased the level of early voting substantially. The change between 2002 and 2006 was about 400,000 voters—so that the 2006 off-year election exceeded the number of absentee ballots in the presidential election year of 2004. It is also clear that such ballots are more numerous in presidential years, but early voting increased substantially between 2004 and 2008 as well (by about 1.1 million voters). If these trends were to continue, early voters could rise to two million ballots in 2012.⁴

Table 2 shows the breakdown of early votes in the 2010 election by method of voting. Mail was the largest method by which early votes were cast, accounting for 82.2% of early ballots, with the remaining 17.8% cast in person (such as at Board of Elections office). Also, nearly all the early ballots were cast from within the county and only a tiny fraction were cast from outside the county (such as by military personnel overseas).

Table 2: Early Voting in 2010 by Method of Voting

Percentage of Early Votes by Mail	82.2%
Percentage of Early Votes In-Person	17.8%
Percentage of In-Country	99.8%
Percentage of Out-of -Country	0.2%

Source: Ohio Secretary of State

⁴ In 2006, overall turnout was 53.3 percent of registered voters; in 2008, overall turnout was 70 percent of registered voters, and in 2010, overall turnout was 49.2 percent of registered voters.

What were the Patterns of Early Voting across the State?

There has been considerable variation in early voting across the state of Ohio. Early voting was most common in central and northeast Ohio, especially in Franklin and Cuyahoga counties. In contrast, southwest Ohio (and particularly Hamilton County) showed lower levels of absentee voting. Overall, the more Democratic parts of the state tended to be more active in early voting. Maps 1, 2 and 3 display these patterns for 2006, 2008 and 2010, presenting the percentage of the vote cast by county. (For maps of early votes as a percentage of registered voters and the total count of early ballots, see Appendix I).

[Map 1](#)

[Map 2](#)

[Map 3](#)

Two of the most populous counties in the state, Franklin (Columbus) and Cuyahoga (Cleveland) had high levels of early voting in 2006, 2008, and 2010. For example in 2006 and 2008, Franklin exceeded Cuyahoga in early voting as a percentage of the vote cast, but in 2010, Cuyahoga showed higher figures than Franklin (see Maps 1, 2 and 3). Interestingly, Hamilton County (Cincinnati) always showed lower levels of early voting than Franklin and Cuyahoga counties, across all three elections.⁵

Note that many of the Appalachian counties of southeastern Ohio also showed higher levels of early voting as a percentage of the vote cast, including Belmont, Monroe, and Ross counties. However, these counties have relatively small numbers of voters. Other counties with

⁵ One reason for county differences may be the approach of the local Boards of Elections to applications for absentee vote. For example, Cuyahoga and Franklin counties mailed out absentee applications to all registered voters in 2010. A review of local policies suggests that these practices are rare but do appear to be associated with a higher rate of early voting.

high levels of early voting as a percentage of the vote cast include Lake (northeast Ohio) and Delaware (central Ohio) over these three elections.

When and Why did Voters Cast a Ballot Early?

An Akron Buckeye survey⁶ of voters after the 2010 election provides some tentative answers to this question: most early voters did so because of convenience and accessibility to the polls.⁷

Table 3 lists when the early voters reported casting their ballots. The largest proportion, more than one-quarter (29.6%), reported voting within one week of Election Day and another one-quarter (26.5%) reported voting within two weeks. Thus more than one-half of early voters reported casting their ballots in the last two weeks of the campaign. About one-quarter (24.5%) voted within three weeks of Election Day and about one-fifth (18.5%) voted within four weeks of Election Day.

Table 3: When Early Votes were Cast, 2010

Within four weeks of Election Day	18.5%
Within three weeks of Election Day	24.5%
Within two weeks of Election Day	26.5%
Within one week of Election Day	29.6%
<i>Total</i>	<i>100.0%</i>

Source: 2010 Post-Election Akron Buckeye Poll

⁶ This survey was conducted by the Center for Marketing and Opinion Research of Akron, Ohio for the Bliss Institute right after the 2010 general election. The survey was a telephone survey of 1,068 registered voters, including both landlines and cell phones. The sample included 189 early voters. The margin of error for the entire sample was plus or minus three percentage points, and for early voters was plus or minus seven percentage points. The data was weighted to account for the demographic mix of Ohio and was done in order to reduce sampling error that might skew the results. The study included a special battery of questions about early voting.

⁷ In this survey, 22.8 percent of the respondents reported voting early by one means or another. This figure is a little lower than the official voter figures reported in Table 1, but the difference is about the size of the margin of error of the survey.

Table 4 reports the reasons given by early voters on why they choose to vote early and not on Election Day. This was an open-ended question and the many verbatim answers were combined into the most frequent categories of responses (see Appendix II for more detail). By far, the most common reason given was convenience, with 64.0% of the respondents citing this category. The distant second category was accessibility to the polls, a category mentioned by 16.2% of early voters. So, a total of 80.2% of early voters did so because it was easier for them to vote early than on Election Day. Another 5.5% reported their past experience at the polls (typically negative). (14.3% listed miscellaneous reasons for voting early.)

Table 4: Top Reasons for Voting Early, 2010

Convenience	64.0%
Accessibility	16.2%
Experience with voting/ polling location	5.5%
Miscellaneous	14.3%
<i>Total</i>	<i>100.0%</i>

Source: 2010 Post-Election Akron Buckeye Poll

Table 5 reports the reasons why people chose to vote on Election Day at the polling place rather than vote early (also an open-ended question with the numerous verbatim responses combined into frequent categories of responses; see Appendix II for more detail). The most common reason for voting at the polling place on Election Day was experience with voting/ polling location (typically positive), with 44.7%. This response category was followed by convenience (25.8%), trust in the voting process (5.8%), and accessibility to the polls (4.7%). (19.1% listed miscellaneous reasons for voting early.)

It appears that relatively few early voters in 2010 were new voters. Survey evidence suggests a low estimate for the proportion of new voters among early voters was about 5%

(using the 2008 presidential election as a base) and a high estimate is 14% (using the 2006 gubernatorial election as a base). Most new, early voters appear to be young people who have become old enough to be eligible to vote.

Table 5: Top Reasons for Voting on Election Day, 2010

Experience with voting/ polling location	44.7%
Convenience	25.8%
Trust	5.8%
Accessibility	4.7%
Miscellaneous	19.1%
<i>Total</i>	<i>100.0%</i>

Source: 2010 Post-Election Akron Buckeye Poll

What Impact did the Electoral and Political Process have on Early Voting?

The electoral and political process had a modest effect on early voting. A lack of trust in the electoral process seems to have been an inhibiting factor in early voting. Early voters received modestly less campaign contact than election-day voters, and although there was no difference in the partisanship of such contact, early voters included a larger number of strong Democrats compared to election-day voters.

Trust in the electoral process was related to early voting. Table 6 reports the level of confidence that voters had that their vote was counted fairly. The results show that people who voted on election day tended to be more confident that their vote would be counted than those who voted early—by 11.9 percentage points (68.7 to 56.8%, respectively). This result may reflect a perception of greater risk in casting an absentee ballot rather than voting in person. This finding suggests that a lack of trust in the absentee voting process may have reduced the number of people who voted early in 2010.

Table 6: Confidence that Vote will be Counted Fairly, 2010

<i>Election-day Voters</i>		<i>Early Voters</i>	
A great deal of confidence	68.7%	A great deal of confidence	56.8%
Some confidence	25.8%	Some confidence	35.8%
Little confidence	3.4%	Little confidence	5.8%
No confidence	2.0%	No confidence	1.6%

Source: 2010 Post-Election Akron Buckeye Poll

It is worth noting, however, that Ohio voters as a whole had a great deal of confidence that their ballots would be counted fairly, with 65.9% expressing “a great deal of confidence.” This figure is largely unchanged from 2006 (64.8% in the 2006 Akron Buckeye Poll).

In fact, very few voters reported problems with casting a ballot. Table 7 shows the report by early voters and election-day voters of problems with the process of voting in 2010. The results clearly show that experiences with problems during the election were rare. Nearly 97% of election day voters reported no problems and about 98% of early voters reported no problems with voting (these differences are not statistically significant). In comparison, 6% of voters overall reported some kind of problem voting in 2006 (according to the 2006 Akron Buckeye Poll). These findings suggest that the 2010 election ran relatively smoothly for the average Ohio voter.

Table 7: Reported Problems Voting, 2010

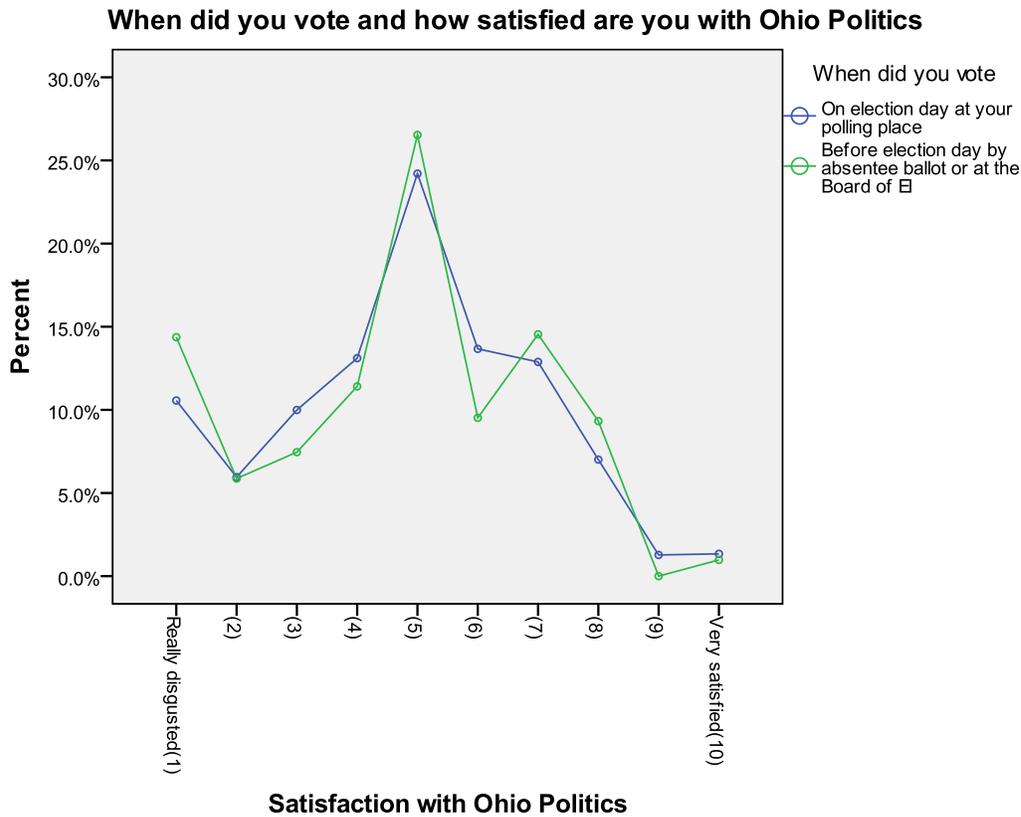
<i>Election Day Voters</i>		<i>Early Voters</i>	
I had problems	3.4%	I had problems	2.1%
Everything went smoothly	96.6%	Everything went smoothly	97.9%

Source: 2010 Post-Election Akron Buckeye Poll

Voters may have had a positive evaluation of election administration, but what about their views on the political process? Figure 1 plots the level of satisfaction voters expressed with

politics in Ohio, measured on a ten-point scale from “disgusted” (1) to “very satisfied” (10), for both early voters (green line) and election day voters (blue line).

Figure 1: Satisfaction with Ohio Politics, Early and Election-day Voting, 2010



Source: 2010 Post-Election Akron Buckeye Poll

Overall, Ohio voters expressed relatively low levels of satisfaction with the political process in 2010. For example, a little more than one-third of respondents gave the political process a score above 5 on the ten-point scale. However, early and election-day voters showed very similar patterns in their evaluation of the political process. Early voters were slightly more “disgusted” than election-day voters, but also slightly more likely to express greater “satisfaction” as well.

Table 8 shows the approximate time when the early and election-day voters made up their minds how they were going to vote. About one-third of early voters and election-day voters decided how they would vote just after the 2010 primaries and another one-sixth of both groups of voters said they made up their minds over the summer. The key difference between early and election-day voters is during the fall campaign: one-half of early voters reported making up their minds in September or October, compared to one-third of election-day voters. In contrast, less than one-tenth of early voters said they made up their minds in the last week of the campaign, compared to one-quarter of election-day voters.

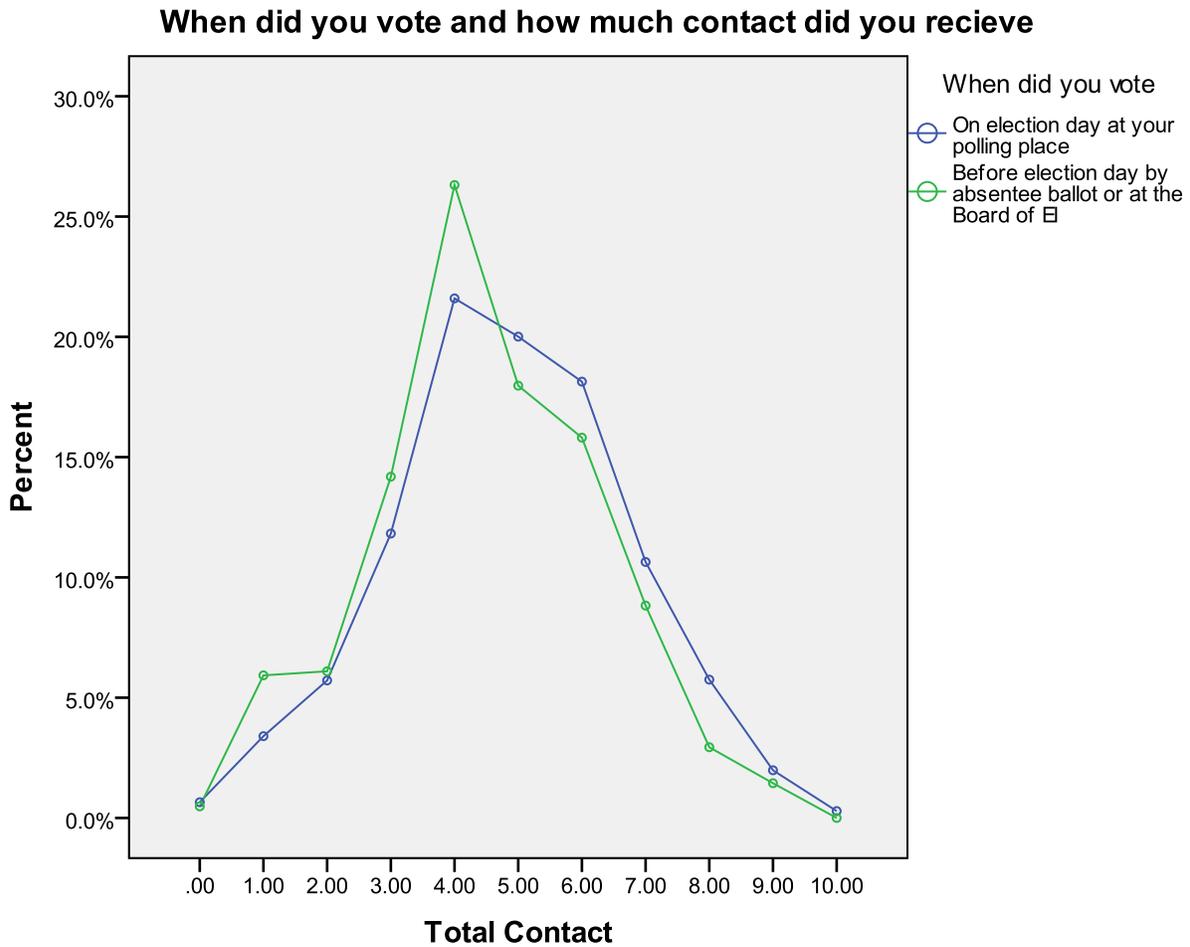
Table 8: When Voters Decided How to Vote in the 2010 General Elections

<i>Election-day Voters</i>		<i>Early Voters</i>	
After the 2010 Primaries	30.2%	After the 2010 Primaries	29.7%
During the summer	14.6%	During the summer	12.4%
In September	11.4%	In September	18.4%
In October	20.3%	In October	32.4%
The weekend before	13.3%	The weekend before	5.4%
On Election Day	10.2%	On Election Day	1.6%

Source: 2010 Post-Election Akron Buckeye Poll

What about the level of campaign contact among early and election-day voters? Figure 2 plots the reported level of campaign contact from ten different sources for both kinds of voters. Although the difference in the level of contact is not dramatic, early voters reported less campaign contact than election-day voters. The pattern makes intuitive sense both because early voters may have paid less attention to the campaign once they had cast a ballot, and because the campaigns may have stopped contacting voters once they knew they had voted.

Figure 2: Level of Campaign Contact, Early and Election-day Voters, 2010



Source: 2010 Post-Election Akron Buckeye Poll

Where are there differences in contact from the Democratic and Republican parties among early and election-day voters? Table 9 shows the reported party contact for each kind of voter. Here, both early and election-day voters reported nearly identical amounts of contact from the political parties. Most voters reported hearing equally from both parties (about 70%), and about the same numbers reported hearing more from the Democrats (about 11%) or more from the Republicans (about 18%) reported hearing equally from Republican and Democratic campaign sources.

Table 9: Level of Party Contact, 2010

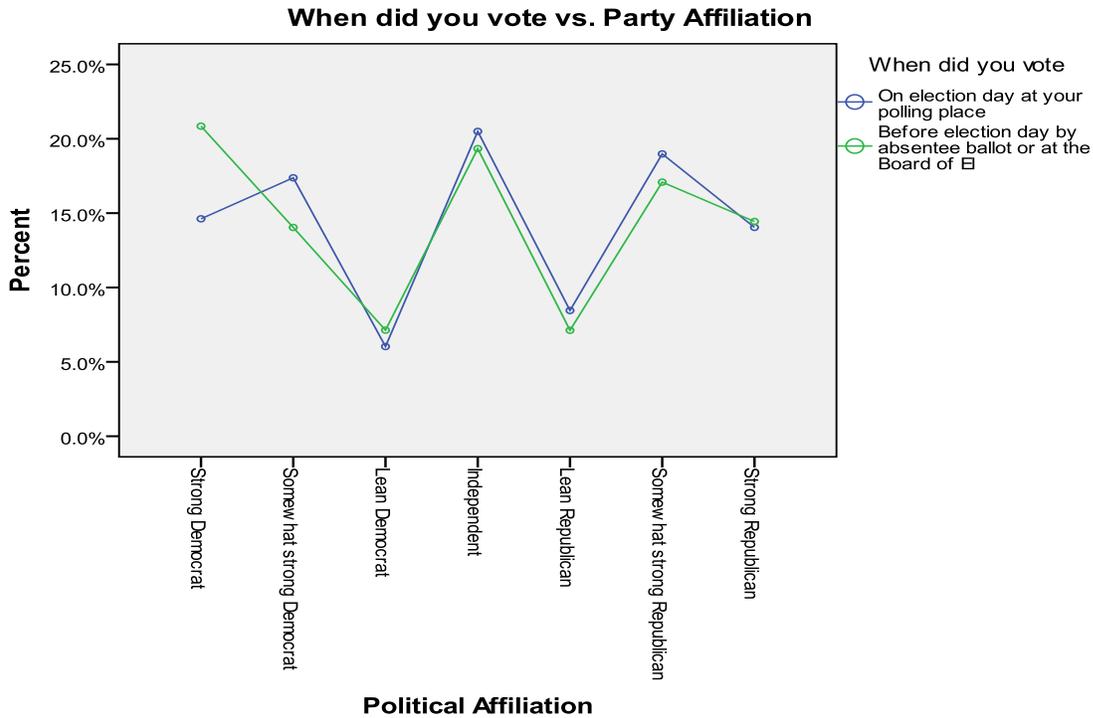
<i>Election Day Voters</i>		<i>Early Voting</i>	
Democrats	11.0%	Democrats	11.8%
Republicans	17.8%	Republicans	17.7%
About the same for each	71.1%	About the same for each	70.4%

Source: 2010 Post-Election Akron Buckeye Poll

There was, however, a difference in the self-identified partisanship of early voters, a pattern reported in Figure 3 for early and election-day voters. Early voters were more likely to be “strong Democrats” than day-of-election voters—but “strong Republicans” were equally common among both kinds of voters. Independents had roughly equal proportions among early and election-day voters.

There was also a modest difference in the issue priorities of early voters: while all voters gave the economy and jobs topic priority, early voters were more likely to stress government programs and taxes (34%) compared to election-day voters (26%). These priorities fit with the strong Democratic partisanship profile of the early voters.

Figure 3: Party Identification, Early and Election-day Voters, 2010



Source: 2010 Post-Election Akron Buckeye Poll

What are the Demographic Characteristics of Early Voters?

The characteristics of early voters differed from election-day voters in a number of important ways: early voters were more likely to be women, older, and to have lower income and educational attainment.

Table 10 shows a sharp difference in the gender of early and day-of-election voters. Early voters are much more likely to be women than day-of-election voters, 62.1 to 48.8%. And thus election-day voters were much more likely to be male, 51.2 to 37.9%.

Table 10: Gender, Early and Election-day Voters, 2010

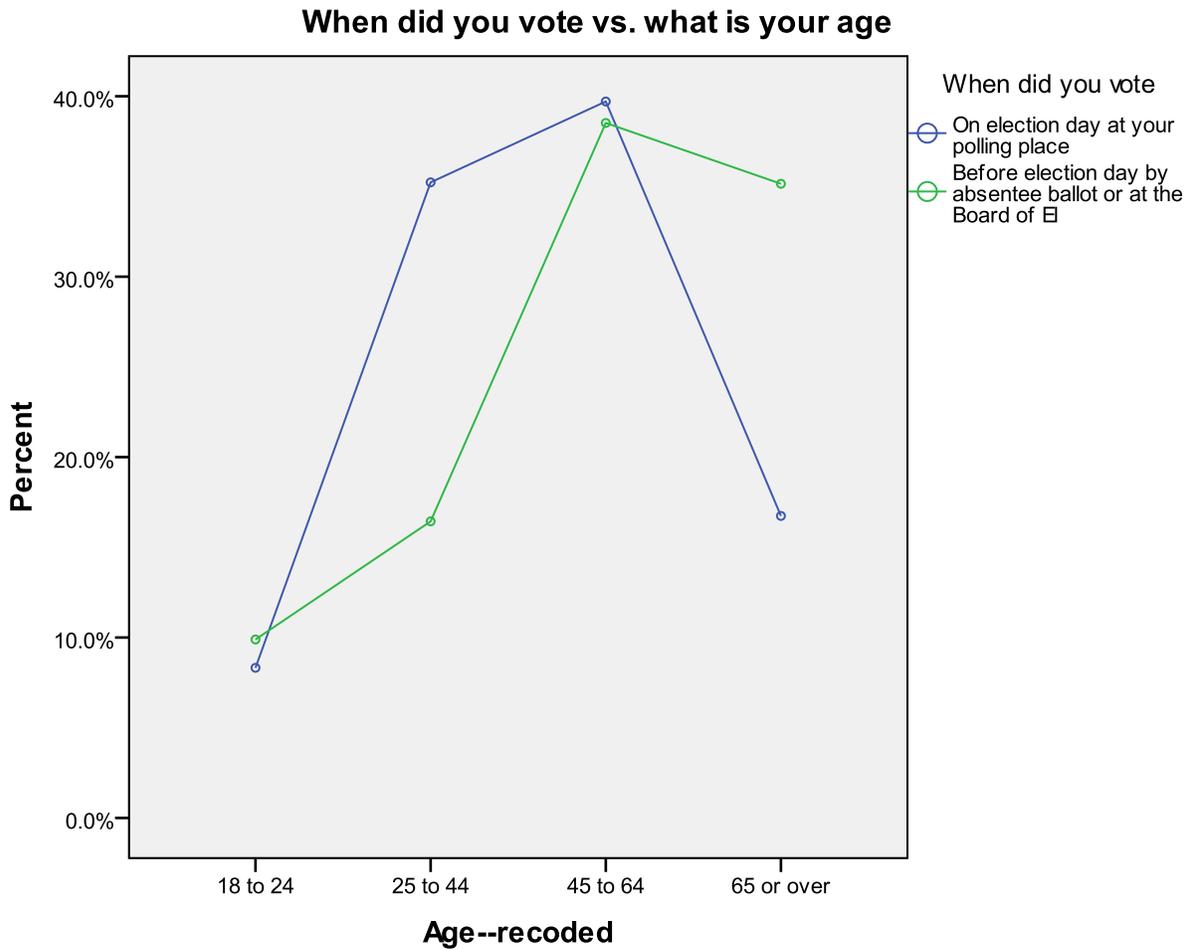
<i>Election-day Voters</i>		<i>Early Voters</i>	
Male	51.2%	Male	37.9%
Female	48.8%	Female	62.1%

Source: 2010 Post-Election Akron Buckeye Poll

Figure 4 compares the age profile of early and election-day voters. These patterns reveal that early voters were older than election-day voters, and this difference is especially noticeable among those 65 years or older. In contrast, election-day voters had larger numbers who were 25 to 44 years old.

Along these lines, marital status was also associated with time of voting, with 67% of election-day voters married compared to 53% of early voters, who were more likely to be divorced or widowed.

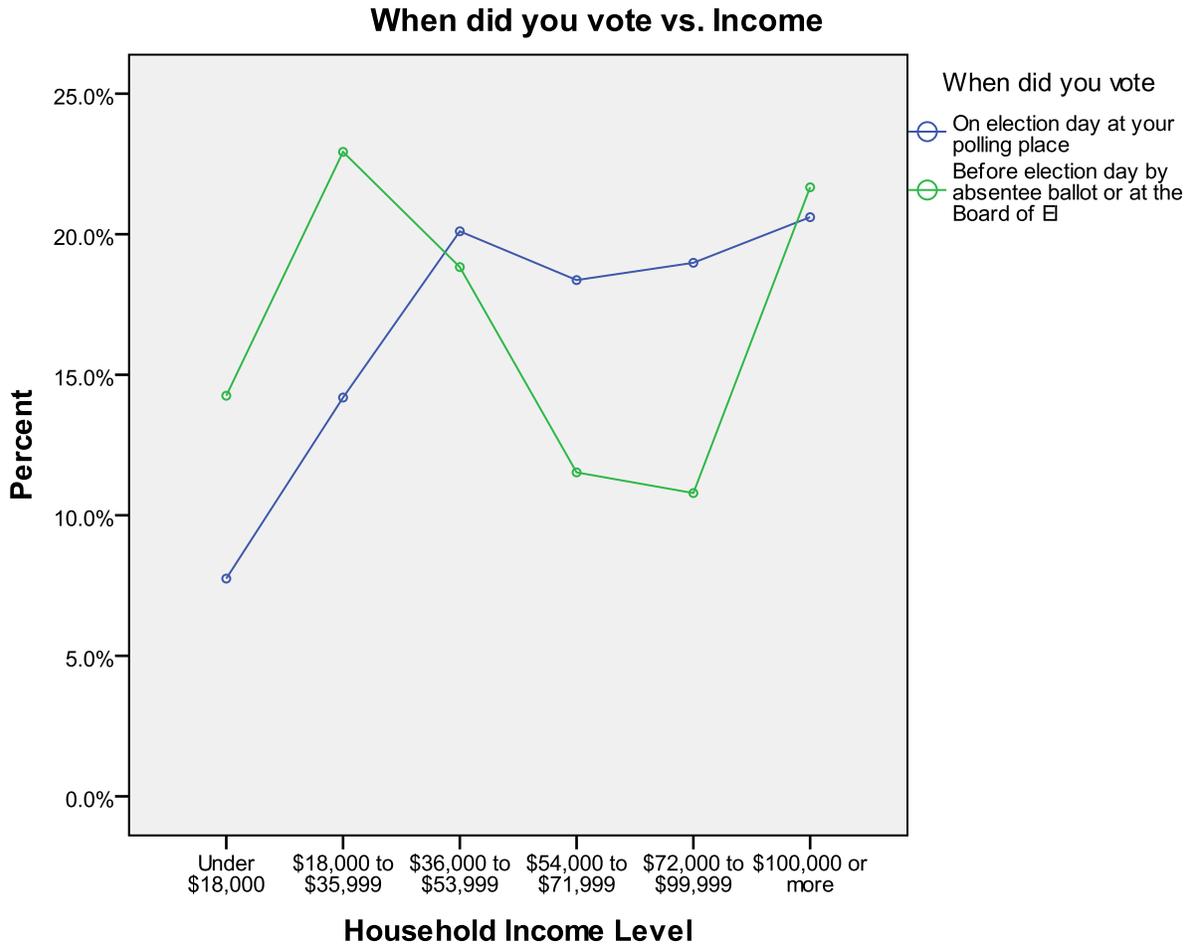
Figure 4: Age, Early and Election Day Voters,



Source: 2010 Post-Election Akron Buckeye Poll

Figure 5 compares the income profile of early and election-day voters. Early voters tend to have lower income than election-day voters. This difference is most noticeable among people with annual incomes of less than \$35,000. In contrast, election-day voters were more likely to have annual incomes above \$35,000. Note, however, that both groups of voters had about the same number of people in the highest income category (\$100,000 or more).

Figure 5: Income, Early and Election-day Voters, 2010

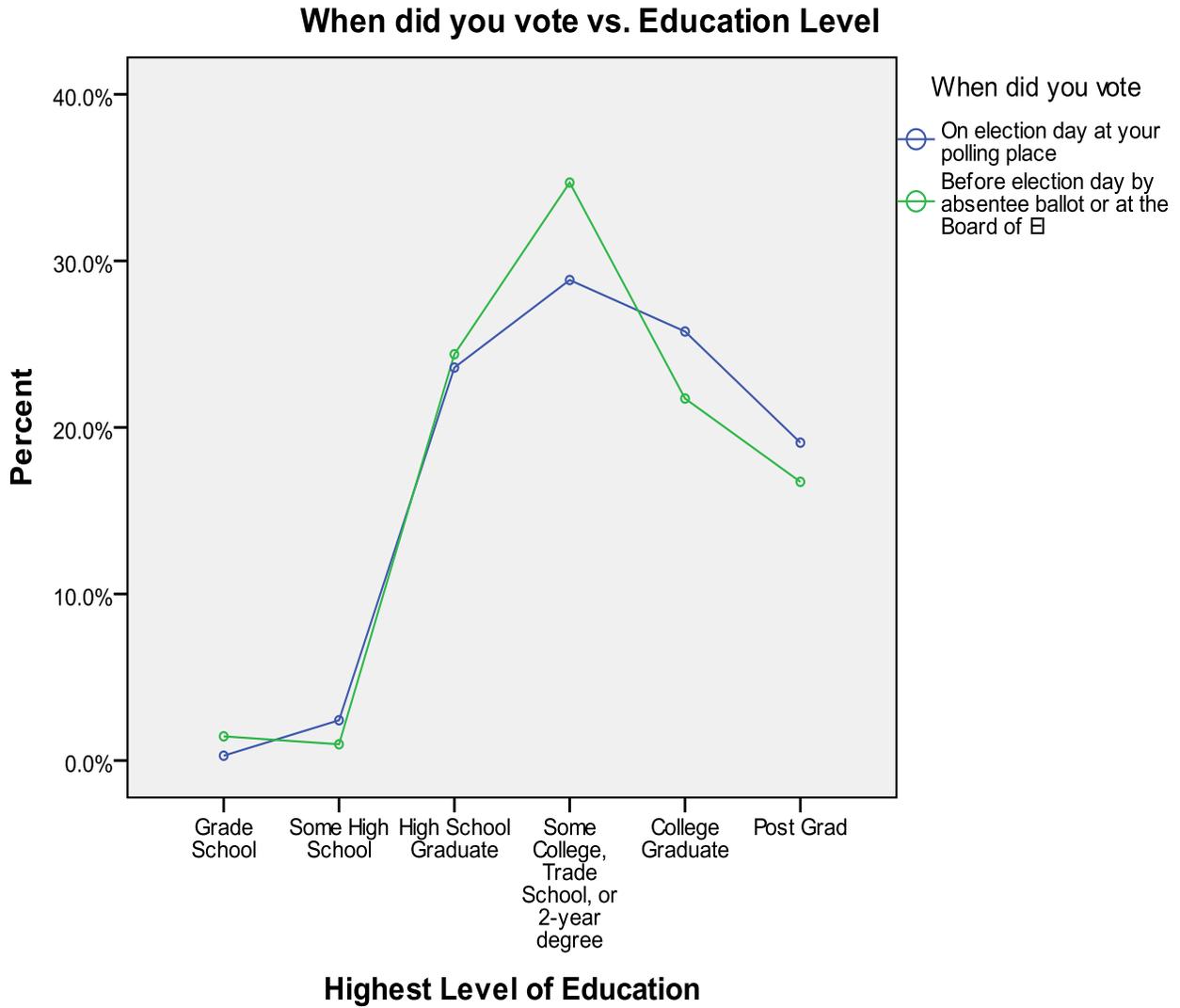


Source: 2010 Post-Election Akron Buckeye Poll

Figure 6 shows the education profile of early and election-day voters. Education is strongly associated with voter turnout of all kinds, so it is not surprising that neither group of voters contains a large number of poorly-educated voters. But note that early voters are most common at the middle-level of educational attainment, with a large number having some training beyond high school but not a college degree. In contrast, election-day voters were more numerous among the college-educated.

Neither race nor ethnicity was associated with early voting, and religion showed only a modest relationship (with the unaffiliated population more likely to be early voters).

Figure 6: Education, Early and Election-day Voters, 2010



Source: 2010 Post-Election Akron Buckeye Poll

What was the Impact of Early Voting on Election Results?

Early voters on balance favored Democratic candidates in 2010. Table 10 shows the vote for governor, U.S. Senator, and members of Congress among early and election-day voters. In the very close 2010 gubernatorial race, the Republican John Kasich won the election-day vote with 51.4% of the ballots, but Democrat Ted Strickland won the early vote with 52.8%

of the vote. As noted above, the election-day vote was much larger than the early vote, allowing Kasich to prevail. A higher election-day vote for the Democrats might well have changed the outcome of the race. However, a higher early vote for the Republicans might have produced a large GOP victory.

Table 10: Election Results, Early and Election-day Voters, 2010

<i>Governor</i>	<i>Kasich</i>	<i>Strickland</i>	Total
Election-day Voting	51.4	48.6	100.0
Early Voting	47.2	52.8	100.0
 <i>Senator</i>	 <i>Portman</i>	 <i>Fisher</i>	
Election-day Voting	60.9	39.1	100.0
Early Voting	54.7	45.3	100.0
 <i>Congress</i>	 <i>Republican</i>	 <i>Democratic</i>	
Election-day Voting	54.7	45.3	100.0
Early Voting	47.7	52.3	100.0

Source: 2010 Post-Election Akron Buckeye Poll

A very similar pattern held for the aggregate congressional vote in 2010. In the Senate race, Republican Rob Portman won by a large margin, but even so, Democrat Lee Fisher did better among the early voters.

This pattern does not appear to be unique to 2010. As Table 11 reveals, a similar pattern held in 2006. Although the Democratic candidates won by large margins on Election Day, they did even better among early voters.

Table 11: Election Results, Early and Election-day Voters, 2006

<i>Governor</i>	<i>Strickland</i>	<i>Blackwell</i>	<i>Total</i>
Election-day Voting	64.3	35.7	100.0
Early Voting	75.5	24.5	100.0
<i>Senator</i>	<i>Brown</i>	<i>DeWine</i>	
Election-day Voting	57.3	42.7	100.0
Early Voting	67.0	33.0	100.0
<i>Congress</i>	<i>Democrat</i>	<i>Republican</i>	
Election-day Voting	57.5	42.5	100.0
Early Voting	69.2	30.8	100.0

Source: 2010 Post-Election Akron Buckeye Poll

Appendix I: Additional Early Voting Maps

[Map 4](#)

[Map 5](#)

[Map 6](#)

[Map 7](#)

[Map 8](#)

[Map 9](#)

Appendix II: Reasons for Voting

The following appendix shows the breakdown of categories for Table 4 (Why did you vote early in the 2010 elections?) and for Table 5 (Why did you decide to vote on Election Day?)

Table 4 Categories:

Category 1 Convenience	64.0%
I knew I was going to be out of town	16.6%
Convenience	14.2%
I wanted to avoid long lines/traffic	9.7%
I knew who I was voting for	9.4%
I knew I would be working	3.5%
My work/school schedule changes	3.3%
Always do absentee ballot	2.9%
I wanted the ballot so I could study the choices	2.4%
I was afraid that I would forget	2.0%
Category 2 Accessibility	16.2%
Illness/Disability	10.3%
Polling location is far away	4.4%
Transportation	1.0%
Recently Moved	.5%
Category 3 Miscellaneous	14.3%
Miscellaneous	7.8%
I am a poll worker/required to vote absentee	5.2%
I wanted to be sure my vote counted	1.3%

Category 4 Experience with voting/polling location	5.5%
Received a ballot in the mail	3.0%
Dislike experience at the polling location	1.5%
Curious about the experience	.5%
Did not want to feel hurried making choices	.5%

Table 5 Categories:

Category 1 Experience with voting/polling location	44.7%
I always vote in person	25.5%
Enjoy the experience/honor the tradition	17.3%
I wanted as much time as possible to study my choices	1.9%

Category 2 Convenience	25.8%
It is convenient/not a hassle	11.2%
I live/work close to polling center	5.8%
Did not get around to early voting/BoE is Inconvenient	4.7%
I knew I would be available to vote in person	3.7%
I get time off of work to vote on Election Day	.4%

Category 3 Miscellaneous	19.1%
No reason/That is just how I did it	8.4%
Miscellaneous	6.5%
Did not see a point in voting early	4.2%

Category 4 Trust	5.8%
Do not trust early vote ballots	3.3%
Wanted to be sure that my vote counted	2.5%

Category 5 Accessibility	4.7%
Did not know how to obtain a ballot/procedures	1.7%
I had not made up my mind yet	1.2%
Did not receive my absentee ballot	1.1%
Forgot to request a ballot	0.7%