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# When Florida Rolled Back Early Voting, Minorities were Especially Affected

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Access to the ballot has expanded over the course of American history – but voting rights are also reversed from time to time. One of the most abrupt reversals occurred in Florida in 2011. Backed by Republican Governor Rick Scott, the state legislature reduced the number of early voting days from 14 to eight and eliminated in-person voting on the final Sunday before the Tuesday election. This change of course for ballot access was far from a nonpartisan move. As chair of the Florida GOP Jim Greer later explained, the "Republican Party, the strategists, the consultants… firmly believe that early voting is bad for Republican Party candidates."

Did things turn out as the party honchos expected? Drawing on multiple slices of official statewide voter files, my colleague Michael Herron and I analyzed whether the retrenchment of early voting had differential effects for different groups of Florida voters. Our results indicate that shrinking the early voting period worked as its architects apparently intended. Early voting by minorities went down in 2012, and voters who had cast ballots on the final Sunday of early voting in 2008 ended up with especially low participation in the 2012 general election.

## Early Voting by Blacks and Hispanics

A comparison of early voting in 2008 and 2012 by black, Hispanic, and white Florida voters reveals some interesting patterns:

- Black Floridians are heavy users of the early voting option. Blacks made up about 13 percent of Florida's registered voter pool in 2008 and almost 14 percent in 2012, yet in both elections they made up about 22 percent of the early voters.

- The percentage of all voters who used early voting dropped more sharply for minorities than for whites from 2008 to 2012. For blacks, the early voting share dropped from 35.7% to 31.6%; and for Hispanics, the early voting share dropped from 19.9% to 15.3%. But for whites, the early voting share went down only slightly from 18.5% to 17.6%.

A further step in our analysis involved specifying trends in early voting turnout by registered voters in each racial and ethnic group for each of Florida's 67 counties. Did black registered voters in Broward County, for example, vote early at the same or different rates in 2008 and 2012? Our findings are clear-cut:

- Across almost every county in Florida, black voters were disproportionately heavy users of early voting in both 2008 and 2012; yet in all of the medium-sized and large Florida counties, black early voting rates declined from 2008 to 2012.

- Similar declines happened in Hispanic early voting, especially in Miami-Dade County.

- Minority early voting turnout declined from 2008 to 2012 in almost all Florida counties.

## What Did 2008 Early Voters Do in 2012?

Finally, we were interested to discover whether Florida's cutbacks in early voting opportunities especially affected ultimate turnout rates in 2012 by early voters from 2008. Of course, we cannot know for certain whether some registered voters who didn't vote in 2012 would have voted had that election year's early voting period remained as long as in 2008. However, we can study the extent to which 2012 voting by white, black, and Hispanic voters varied according to when they had voted across the two week period in which early

balloting was possible in 2008.

Some notable patterns emerged from our temporal analysis:

- No matter which day they voted in 2008, Hispanic early voters in 2008 were less likely to cast valid ballots of any type in 2012 than were black and white early 2008 voters.

- Black early voters in 2008 were more likely than white early voters in 2008 to vote validly in 2012 – yet the magnitude of the black-white gap varied dramatically according to how early people had voted in 2008. For example, roughly 87 percent of blacks who voted early on the first Sunday in 2008 cast a valid ballot in 2012.

- Fascinating weekend patterns also appeared. For blacks, Hispanics, and whites alike, first weekend early voters in 2008 ended up with relatively high rates of casting valid votes in 2012. But in all three groups, second weekend early voters from 2008 had relatively low valid voting rates in 2012; and the final-Sunday early voters from November 2, 2008 ended up casting valid 2012 votes at a very low rate.

A logical interpretation of our findings is that people who voted early on the first possible weekend in 2008 were quite highly politically engaged; those who voted early on the second weekend were less engaged; and people who early-voted on the final Sunday in 2008 were the least politically engaged. By the 2012 election, of course, Florida Republicans had acted to truncate the early voting period – and in particular they eliminated early voting on the Sunday before Election Day. This reduced chances for the least committed early voters from 2008.

Another way to put it is this: a non-trivial fraction of people who voted early on the last Sunday in 2008 were not highly motivated and went to the polls only because that final-Sunday opportunity existed. Black church congregations, for instance, often mount "Souls to the Polls" efforts to get entire groups to the polls on a Sunday non-work day. We cannot know for certain whether the removal of the right to vote on the last Sunday in 2012 discouraged turnout at all by a lot of people, especially minorities, who had early-voted on that last Sunday in 2008 – but our results are certainly consistent with that possibility.

In sum, Florida's decision to truncate early voting in 2012 not only seems to have diminished early participation rates for black and Hispanic voters. It discouraged turnout at any point in 2012 by the least determined registered former early voters. In his 2012 reelection victory, President Barack Obama carried the Sunshine State as he had in 2008. Nevertheless, the Florida GOP effort to restrict minority early voting seems to have functioned as intended – and who knows how the rollback could affect the bottom line in future elections.

**Read more in Michael C. Herron and Daniel A. Smith, "Race, Party, and the Consequences of Restricting Early Voting in Florida in the 2012 General Election." *Political Research Quarterly* (2014).**