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# Assessing Internet Voting as an Early Voting Reform in the United States

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# Research Question

What effect does Internet voting have on voter turnout and the composition of the electorate?

Context:

- Internet voting as an early voting reform
- Goal of early voting reforms: increase turnout, expand participation, ease administrative burdens on Election Day

Question

Literature Review

Data

Findings

Conclusions

# “Easy” Voting Reforms

- US States have tried: Registration reform, vote-by-mail, no-excuse absentee, in-person early voting
- Reforms intended to make voting more convenient, but have not resulted in substantially higher turnout
- Unintended consequence: benefits educated, higher income, and older voters - “more of the same”

*Demographic biases in the  
electorate increase*

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# Have Voting Reforms Failed?

## Existing Research:

- Berinsky 2005, “The Perverse Consequences of Voting Reform”
- Traugott 2004, “Why Voting Reform Has Failed”

## Problems:

- Most studies are aggregated, not at the individual level - so hard to tell if new voters are created
- Few opportunities to study Internet voting in the US, which could have a different effect on turnout than other reforms

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# Contribution of this research project

1. New opportunity to study individual level effects of Internet voting
  - are young people more likely to vote online?
  - are black Americans disadvantaged?
2. Use of statewide voter registration records to examine individual vote history
  - are “new” or “infrequent” voters activated?

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# Internet Voting Data

2 large-scale “tests” of Internet voting in the US:

- Arizona 2000 and Michigan 2004 - both State Party run primaries
- My research is first to examine Michigan Internet voters at the individual level

Data sources for individual voters:

- Michigan Democratic Party 2004 voter participation file - (includes name, vote choice, method, date and time of vote, address, birth date)
- Individual voting history from the Michigan Voter File (approximately 7 million voters)
- Demographic variables (race, education, income) from US Census

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# Background on Michigan Election

- Democratic Party wanted to increase turnout
- Internet voting plan was formally challenged - claim that it was an unfair voting method
- Like Arizona 2000, plan was allowed to proceed with little evidence on either side

# Background on Michigan Election

- Internet voting was one of 3 available voting methods: mail, online, in person
- Required to apply for an absentee ballot, could then return ballot by mail or follow instructions to vote online

| Voting Method | Number | Percentage |
|---------------|--------|------------|
| Internet      | 46,543 | 29         |
| Mail          | 23,482 | 14         |
| Polling Place | 92,904 | 57         |

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# Analyzing the Data: Estimating the Voter Turnout Model

- *Question:* Is choice of voting method related to age, gender, race, income, education or voting history?
- *Dependent variable:* participation in the 2004 primary by Internet, mail, or in person – or abstaining
- *Explanatory variables:* age, gender, race, income, education, voting history
- **Multinomial logit model**

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# Multinomial Logit Results

| Variable                                    | Internet vs. In Person | Mail vs. In Person |
|---|------------------------|--------------------|
| <i>Age of voter</i>                         | -.006**                | .025*              |
| <i>Median Income in Zip Code</i>            | .013*                  | .007*              |
| <i>Percent College Educated in Zip Code</i> | .004                   | -.005              |
| <i>Percent Black in Zip Code</i>            | -.003                  | -.001              |
| <i>Gender of voter (female = 1)</i>         | -.120*                 | .210*              |
| <i>Nonvoter</i>                             | -.560*                 | -.482*             |
| <i>Infrequent voter</i>                     | .719*                  | -.652**            |
| <i>Occasional voter</i>                     | -.133*                 | .034               |
| <i>Regular voter</i>                        |                        |                    |
| <i>Age X Infrequent</i>                     | -.020*                 | .001               |
| <i>Education X Infrequent</i>               | .006                   | .009**             |
| <i>Black X Infrequent</i>                   | -.004**                | .000               |
|   |                        |                    |
| <i>N = 16,906</i>                           |                        |                    |
| <i>Pseudo R<sup>2</sup> = 0.126</i>         |                        |                    |

Question

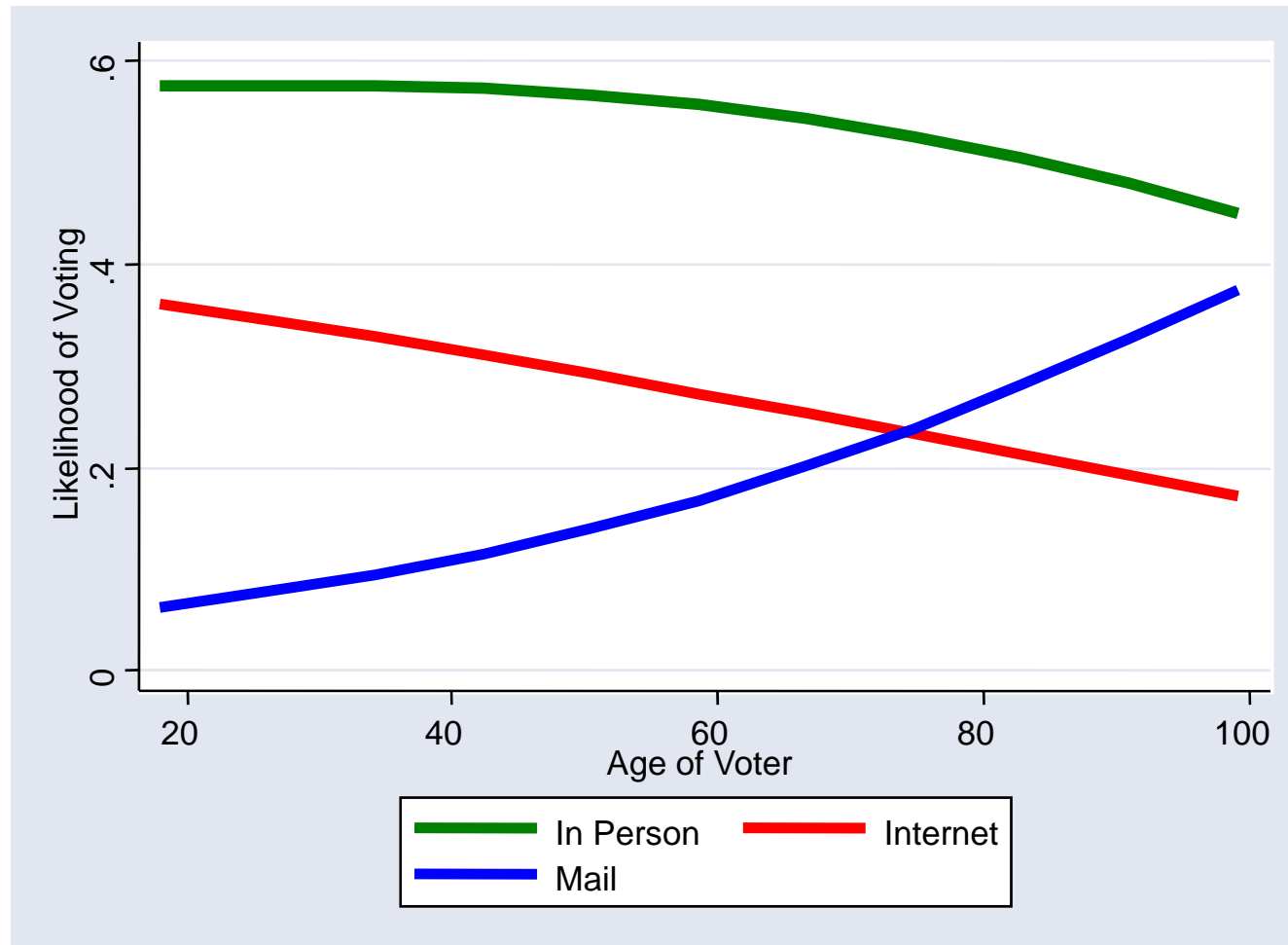
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## Likelihood of Voting by Internet, Mail, or In Person by Age of Voter



Question

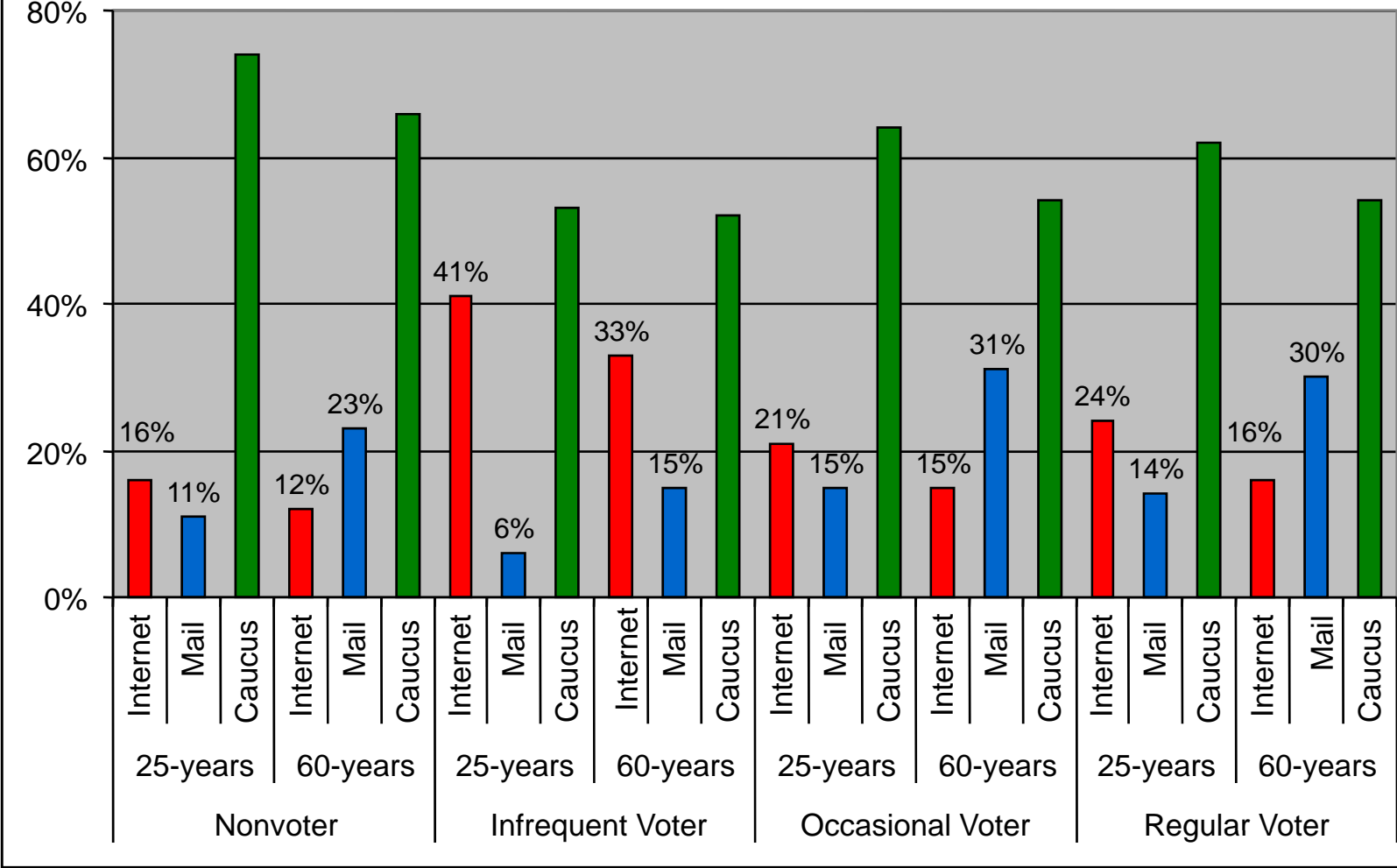
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# Choice of Voting Method by Age and Voting History



# Conclusions

- Young people were much more likely to choose Internet voting over mail voting
- Infrequent voters were much more likely to choose Internet voting over mail voting
- Need to reassess conclusions about early voting reforms in light of these findings about Internet voting

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# Next Steps for Further Research

1. New Tests by State Parties in 2012?

2. Further analysis of existing data:

- Use GIS mapping software to further refine demographic variables
- Incorporate results of surveys of Michigan voters (CBS News) and nationwide attitude on Internet voting
- Include analysis of participation in European Internet voting trials
- Interview election/party officials in Michigan and Arizona

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