

Response to Democratic Party criticisms of my report on the 2013 Election

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In their response to my report on voter turnout in the 2013 election, a Democratic Party critic raises three broad criticisms. First, he or she questions whether comparing 2009 and 2013 is a fair comparison. Second, the critic insists that my analysis uses the wrong numbers. Third, he or she questions my use of sources from the political science literature.

If this response seems long, that is because the critic went on to make personal accusations about my character and my scholarship. These were unprovoked, uncalled for, and unhelpful, but they demand a thorough reply to demonstrate how wrong they are. I will answer each of these criticisms in order of importance, starting with the numbers.

Point #1: Numerical Discrepancies

The most important point is this: my Democratic Party critics offer no evidence of an actual decline in voter turnout. That is because there wasn't one. I'll address their individual complaints, but first offer information directly from the SBoE website on turnout (fn 8 in the report explains why I didn't originally use these).

Table 1: Turnout by SBoE statistics

	Registered Voters	Total Votes	Turnout %
2009	14046	1508	10.7%
2013	16585 ¹	1935	11.7%

If Democratic officials want to argue that turnout only increased by 1% instead of 1.3% I'll concede the point. Nevertheless, my broader conclusion still stands. According to the SBoE, under the new election system in 2013, voting turnout *increased*.

Later in their response, the Democratic officials say that according to their calculations, turnout was 11.9% in both elections. Actually, according to the numbers they provide (1508/14046), turnout in 2009 was 10.7% and turnout still increased. But for the sake of argument, let's assume their 11.9% figure is true. *Even by their chosen numbers, there was no decline in voter turnout.* I could be convinced to say that it's an open question whether turnout increased by a small amount in 2013 or whether it stayed the same, if they are willing to drop their evidence-free rhetoric about reduced turnout.

Still, I admit that doesn't completely address the questions about my data. The core problem is this--discrepancies always appear when you try to integrate different data sets, especially when they are at different levels of analysis (precinct versus individual).

¹ The SBoE website doesn't report this, but since this number wasn't disputed in their response I'll use it.

For example, look at the Democrats' own calculations: in their precinct-based calculations they find that there were 1977 votes cast in 2013, but the SBoE only reports 1935 votes for mayor. Maybe they were using council votes and I was using mayor? Similarly, they said I mistakenly included 200 people in Boone 2 who don't belong there--they say the real figure was 289 votes in Boone 2. I wrote that 230 people voted in Boone 2 in 2013 (table 5), and even assuming they're right, 289-230 equals 59, not 200.

In situations like this, there is no single set of numbers we should treat as gospel. This may seem strange to people who expect certainty from "official" numbers, but the truth is that measurement error always creeps in. Given that, finding trivial differences is, well, trivial. Indeed, I could point out other small discrepancies in my data that the Democratic Party officials apparently missed.

Pointing out these small discrepancies is meaningless unless critics clearly show how they change the substantive conclusions, not just numbers in a table. For example, take their criticism of my figure for Boone 2 early voting (I wrote 119, they claim it was 95). Notice they never say why that is important. That's because even 95 votes is still a *huge* increase from 2009. Again, even their revised numbers support my claims.

Their strongest claim is about the BERT data, but even here they are wrong, and the source of their error shows why discrepancies are inevitable. They say that students who move away disappear from the voter history. The fact is, some do and some don't. In going through my copy I see former students of mine who moved away from Boone but still appear in the registry. Frankly, the honest truth is that we don't really know what turnout percentages are like in the student precincts. If I had to bet money, I'd bet that the actual percentages in both 2009 and 2013 are higher than the published figures.

In short, I agree that there are discrepancies in the data. Nevertheless, my critics offer no evidence that those discrepancies threaten my claim about the absence of voter suppression. In fact, the numbers they themselves cite generally *support* my claims. Moreover, the errors and discrepancies in their own figures speak to the truth--the errors in my report are the result of good faith efforts to analyze messy data, not the "highly slanted, biased and misleading scholarship" they accuse me of.

Point #2: Comparison of 2009 and 2013

They argue that a comparison of 2007 and 2013 would be a better test. This initially sounds reasonable, but ultimately fails.

I have no way of verifying their claims about campaign spending, but I do know that at least one of their other claims is wrong: the Republican Party did not have a "full slate of party-backed candidates" in 2013. There was no Republican-backed mayoral candidate, to begin with. In addition, at least one of the city council candidates ran most of the campaign as an independent (and did not appear to actively campaign until late in the season).

But again, let's assume for the sake of argument that they are right. Even so, comparing 2013 to 2007 still doesn't work. In making controlled comparisons, the two cases should be as close to each other as possible, *except on the variable we want to test, where they must be different*. An important part of the controversy was the BoE's decision to move early voting away from ASU. That means we need to compare an election with early voting at ASU to one with no early voting there. Since there was no early voting in 2007 and none in 2013, that comparison can't tell us anything about how shifting early voting might have affected election turnout.

A colleague of mine brought up a better idea. One might look at the long-term trend in voter turnout over the past decade or two and see how 2013 fits. I couldn't find legacy data on the SBoE website in the limited time I have to write this, so I haven't done it, but I agree that it would be informative. If anyone would like to work together on such a project please email me (ehrhardtgc@appstate.edu).

Point #3: Citations

Frankly, the criticism of my citations is disappointing. These cited authors paint a complex picture of early voting--much more complex than I could in just two paragraphs. They offer plenty of conflicting information about how to increase turnout in Watauga and I would love to engage in a good faith discussion about them.

Unfortunately, whoever prepared the Democratic response decided that all he or she needed to do was skim the introductions (or even just the abstracts). I find it telling that he or she felt comfortable making personal accusations about my character on the basis of a few cherry-picked quotes. Based on those quotes, it's fairly obvious the person who wrote these criticisms wasn't able to read the whole articles, so I've put ungated links to all seven on my web page (<http://www.appstate.edu/~ehrhardtgc/>).

Everyone should read them and decide for yourself--that's much better than reading dueling quotes. Please do! Even if you decide I'm wrong, it's still great seeing academic political science research applied to real-world problems.²

In the first point (footnote #5), the critic says that the cited article reports studies that found an increase in voter turnout from "alternative voting methods." This is correct.

But read the whole article! It goes on to say that those studies are old, and the effect has disappeared (except in Oregon's all-by-mail system). The authors' final paragraph is clear:

“In conclusion, we remain skeptical of those who advocate in favor of early voting reforms primarily on the basis of increased turnout. Both these results, and prior work in political science, simply do not support these claims. There may be good reasons to adopt early voting—more accurate

² Some of the methodology is complicated, but once finals are over I'd be happy to help anyone with questions about the articles (my email is listed a paragraph or two above).

ballot counting, reduced administrative costs and headaches, and increased voter satisfaction—but boosting turnout is not one of them.”

If you really want to increase turnout (as opposed to just finding an issue to bash Republicans about), then find something else to complain about, not early voting.

I understand that the articles for the second point (footnote #7) were gated and my critic wasn't able to read them. For those following along, the quote is the publically available abstract from Brady's article. Brady and his co-author do find that shifting numerous precincts in LA appears to have lowered turnout. Nevertheless, the critic cherry-picks from my report. The full relevant paragraph from my report is as follows:

“The literature on the effects of shifting the location of polling places finds two effects: an individual's likelihood of voting is weakly correlated with changes in their distance from the polls, but the effect of increasing distance is offset by voters switching to early/absentee voting and by voters to whom the polls are coming closer. This matches what happened in the Watauga 2013 election: little to no apparent effect on total turnout due to moving the polls, but some visible switching to early voting in New River 3.”

Basically, my Democratic critic is arguing that I'm wrong to call something affecting 1/200 elections “weak.” Okay, I'll concede a stronger adjective if he or she reads the whole article and sees that part of the decrease is due to one-time search costs that aren't relevant for Watauga in 2014 and beyond.³ In regards my other points in that paragraph, quotes from the articles are clear:

1) Offset by early voting: “Part of this reduction in turnout was alleviated by an increase in absentee voting (the dashed line), with the pure information effect of 0.50% and the transportation effect of about 0.25% throughout the range.” (p.124)

2) Offset by those closer: Look at figure 6 on page 126, and see how the effects of polling place change become positive at the left side (i.e. becoming closer) of the graph. In addition, look at the Haspel article's discussion of what happens when precincts are split and the polls move closer for some residents (at the bottom of p.569).

Note that my critic doesn't contest the most important citation, Burden's 2013 article in *American Journal of Political Science* (an absolutely top-tier journal in our field). I will wrap up this section with a quotation from that article that deserves to be read in full:

“Our unambiguous empirical claims are based on multiple data sources and methods: despite being the most popular election reform, early voting depresses net voter turnout and the only consistent way to increase turnout is to permit election day registration. Early voting reduces turnout by

³ And that they probably aren't relevant to the 2013 election, either. Does anyone think that ASU students have trouble finding Legends?

robbing election day of its stimulating effects. This depressant effect is only partially offset if [same day registration] is present, or if [election day registration] offers a vehicle for the last-minute mobilization of marginal voters. This result upends the conventional view that anything that makes voting easier will raise turnout. (p.36)”

Conclusion

The issue of early voting and polling place location/hours is not as straightforward as it seems. Its true effects are complicated, often indirect, and even contrary to “good sense.” Similarly, the best available data to answer these questions are also complicated. Issues like bad lighting may indeed be more important than poll locations, in some cases. If the Democratic Party truly wants to make voting in Watuaga County the best, most inclusive that it can be, it needs to replace unsupported assertions and personal insults with thoughtful analyses and dialogue.