

The Big Mobilization: Increased Voter Registration in 2008

Report prepared by the Center for the Study of Politics and Governance

Lawrence R. Jacobs
Director, Center for the Study of Politics and Governance
Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs
University of Minnesota

Melanie Burns
Research Analyst
Center for the Study of Politics and Governance
Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs
University of Minnesota

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The 2008 contests for the Republican and Democratic Party presidential nominations have been a boon for American democracy. The intense competition for nomination combined with investments in mobilizing voters for primaries and caucuses has fuelled an historic surge in voter registration compared to its level during the 2004 nomination contests. A study of official voter registration records reveals the following:

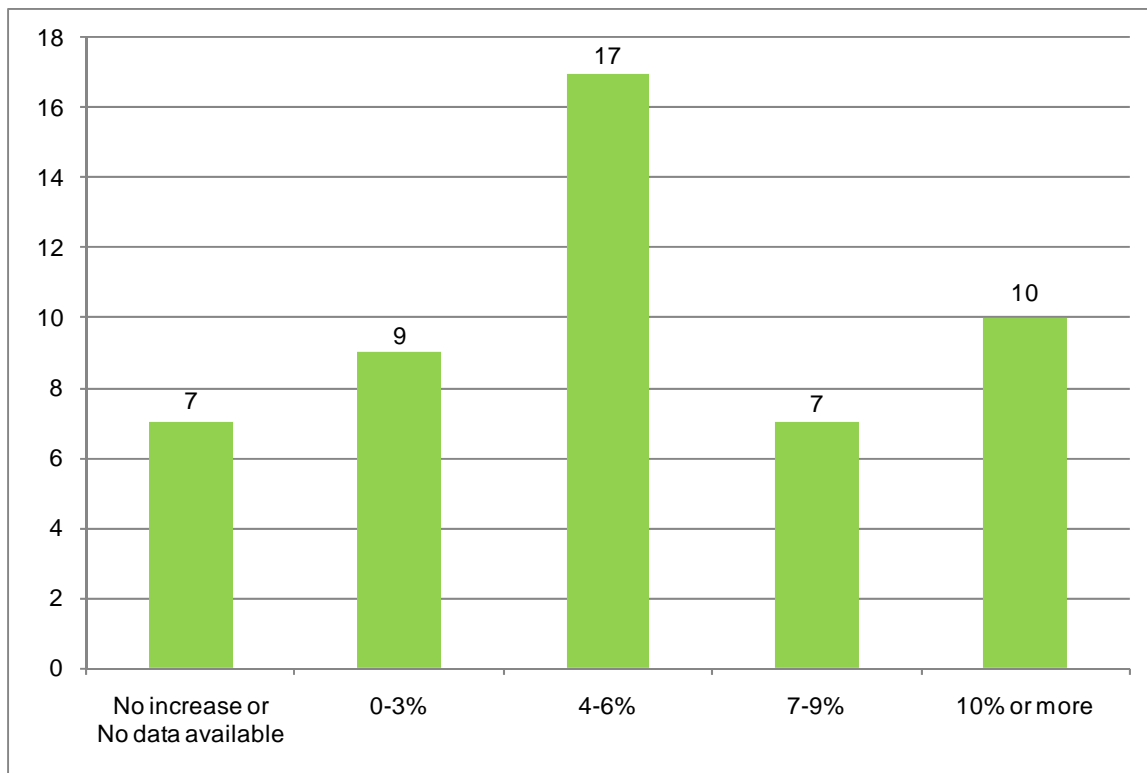
- Record voter registration was produced in 43 out of the 44 states for which there are official data during comparable periods in 2004 and 2008.
- **North Carolina registration in April 2008 is 14 percent higher than in the comparable period in 2004 and Indiana is up 20 percent.** The unusually wide-open competition for the Republican and Democratic presidential nominations has fuelled this remarkable jump in voter participation.
- About a quarter of the new voter registration records were set in purple states, perhaps altering the electoral landscape in these states since 2004.
- Although Democrats fear that the battle between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton may weaken their Party's chances in November by alienating some voters, it may also have helped by increasing voter registration. Seventeen of the 43 states set records during primaries or caucuses that were held **after** Super Tuesday when the Republican contest largely came to an end. These voters may be a new and important pool of voters for Democratic candidates to recruit in November, offsetting perhaps voters that they lose because of lingering ill will.

Breaking Records

2008 is shattering voter registration records. Figure I shows that 43 of 44 states set new voter registration highs during spring 2008 compared to similar periods in 2004. Ten states increased their voter rolls by 10 percent or more including New Hampshire (24 percent), Nevada (20 percent), Arizona (18 percent), and New Mexico (11 percent). The only state that did not increase its registration was Idaho, a heavily Republican state that was not the focus of much campaign activity.

Although observers from around the country may be weary of the Democratic contest, voters in the spotlighted states have been extraordinarily mobilized. Registration in North Carolina has risen by 14 percent and has increased by 20 percent in Indiana. It is also up by 7 percent or more in Pennsylvania and Ohio, which were the focus of the April 22nd primaries. (An appendix below provides a full listing of voter registration figures.)

Figure I. Number of states setting registration records



Source: Each state's Secretary of State Office or Election Board.

A New Landscape in Purple States

The majority of states in the 2008 presidential general election will predictably fall into the Republican or Democratic columns and much of the fall campaign will focus on a dozen or so competitive (or “purple”) states. Many of these states were decided by 5 points or less in the 2004 presidential race between George W. Bush and John Kerry.¹

Figure 2 suggests that the surge in voter registration may have altered the universe of voters in competitive states during the 2008 fall election. For instance, Nevada was won by President Bush by 2.59 points and yet voter registration has increased by 20 percent in 2008. The new voters who were recruited during the heated January 19th contest introduce a wild card into the November race – Who will they support?

The fall contests in Ohio and Florida may also be re-scrambled in unpredictable ways as the increase in voter registration exceeds Bush’s margin of victory. In Florida, Bush’s margin was 5 points and voter registration increased by 9 percent even though Democratic candidates did not campaign in the state. Similarly, the 8 percent surge in Ohio registration rolls dwarfs Bush’s narrow 2 point margin. New Mexico may also follow this pattern -- Bush won by 0.79 points and registration increased by 11 percent.

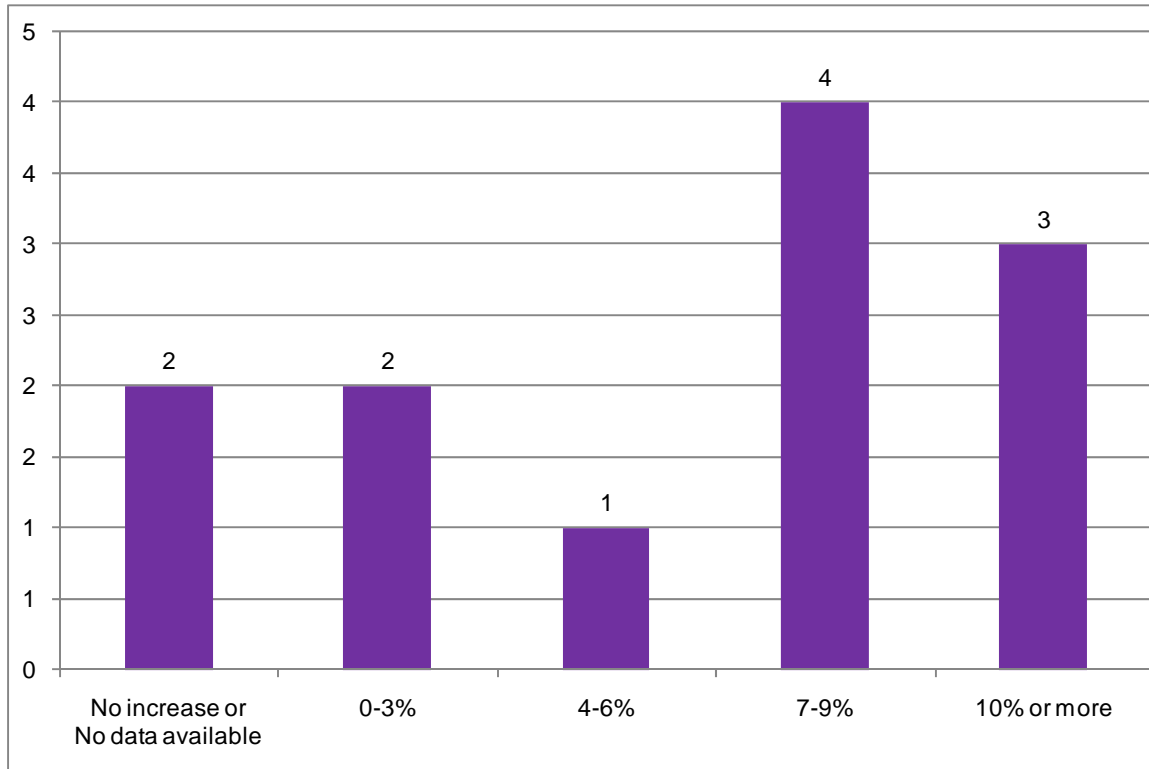
Virginia was not competitive in 2004 but it is becoming more competitive as evident by the 2006 U.S. Senate contest in which Democratic challenger Jim Webb upset the Republican incumbent. The presidential nomination may add more uncertainty for both parties as registration increased by 8.79 percent in 2008 as compared to Bush’s margin of 8.72 points in 2004.

Some of the states that were won by Kerry have also witnessed voter registration figures that exceed his victory margin in 2004. These states include: Iowa (Kerry’s 0.67 point margin versus a 4 percent jump in registration), New Hampshire (Kerry’s 1 point margin versus 24 percent registration increase), Oregon (Kerry’s 4 point margin versus a 7 percent registration rise), and Pennsylvania (Kerry’s 2.5 point margin versus a 7 percent voter registration increase).

The new voters who have streamed into the process during 2008 introduce an unpredictable element into Republican and Democratic calculations for the fall general election.

¹ The 10 States decided by 5 points or less in the 2004 presidential election for which official registration data are available are the following: Colorado, Florida, Iowa, Michigan, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Ohio, Oregon, and Pennsylvania. Minnesota and Wisconsin were also competitive in 2004 but they lack comparable voter registration data for the spring of 2008 and the spring of 2004.

Figure 2. Number of battleground states setting registration records



Source: Each state's Secretary of State Office or Election Board.

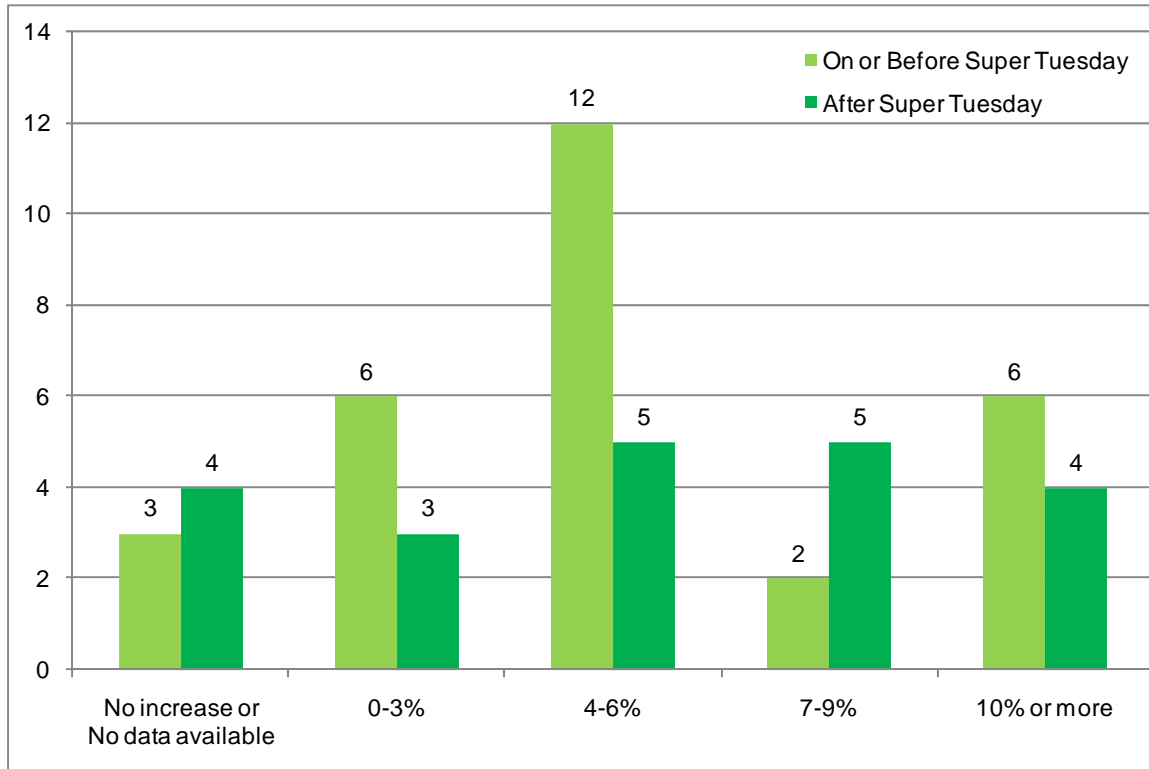
Note: The definition of a "battleground" state is that President Bush or Senator Kerry won by 5% or less.

A Boost for Democrats?

The battle between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination may weaken their Party's chances in November by alienating key groups of voters such as working class whites or African Americans. This intense competition may offer Democrats a silver lining, however. The prolonged fight for the Democratic nomination has unleashed a massive investment in efforts to mobilize voters and excited millions of voters.

17 of the 43 states that set records held primaries or caucuses **after** Super Tuesday when the Republican competition effectively ended with Senator McCain's victory. The new voters in purple states may advantage Democrats in the critical battleground contests in Ohio and Florida as well as in other states that are likely to be closely contested in 2008 – Colorado, Iowa, Michigan, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Oregon, and Pennsylvania.

Figure 3. Number of states setting registration records by date of primary or caucus



Source: Each state's Secretary of State Office or Election Board.

It's not just about the candidates

The surge in voter registration during the 2008 primaries and caucuses is one of the biggest stories of the presidential election. It represents a kind of participatory revolution and may augur well for boosting voter turnout in November from its 64 percent level in 2004 (as reported by the U.S. Census).

The preoccupation with the personalities and individual travails of the presidential candidates may have distracted us from an equally powerful story about voters themselves and their level of engagement. The rise of voter participation is one of the most important and potentially lasting impacts of the 2008 nomination contests.

About the study

The analyses presented in this report are based on data from 2004 and 2008 that were directly collected from the each state's Secretary of State Office or its Election Board. In all, voter registration data was collected from 44 states. This data were unavailable from six states: North Dakota does not have voter registration, Wisconsin did not have statewide voter registration before 2006, the Secretary of State Offices in Minnesota, Mississippi, and Missouri lack comparable statistics from spring 2004, and we were unable to contact the appropriate offices in Hawaii.

Our calculations of change are based on comparing similar time periods in 2004 and 2008. For 2008, we used data available for each state that most closely followed its primary or caucus contest. Our 2004 figures are from the month of April or the month of the state's primary when that was available.

Our study examines change in voter registration. The key is that we use figures from similar time periods during the nomination battles in 2004 and 2008 as well as turnout figures that were calculated using identical methods. The latter point is particularly important. Official registration figures include different mixes of active and inactive voters; our approach was to compare sets of numbers for both years that were calculated using identical counting methods (e.g. we compared figures for active voters in 2004 with active voters in 2008). Calculations for the rate of voter turnout are often based on the age of the population; Michael McDonald produces turnout rates that exclude voters who are ineligible because they are felons or are barred from participating for other reasons. For our study, we compared raw levels of registration in 2004 and 2008; we do not study the rate of turnout.

Appendix: Voter Registration Data, 2004 and 2008

	Availability of registration data in 2008	2008 total registration	Availability of registration data in 2004	2004 total registration	2004 & 2008 Difference	Percent Difference	Contest held after Super Tuesday
Alabama	March 2008	2,773,982	June 2004	2,502,082	271,900	11%	
Alaska	March 2008	469,776	April 2004	448,807	20,969	5%	
Arizona	March 2008	2,694,974	March 2004	2,274,367	420,607	18%	
Arkansas	March 2008	1,593,818	May 2004	1,583,155	10,663	1%	
California	January 2008	15,712,753	February 2004	15,091,160	621,593	4%	
Colorado	April 2008	2,944,512	April 2004	2,849,452	95,060	3%	
Connecticut	October 2007	2,044,511	October 2003	1,965,816	78,695	4%	
Delaware	April 2008	574,001	November 2004	550,984	23,017	4%	
Florida	December 2007	10,203,112	February 2004	9,333,469	869,643	9%	
Georgia	February 2008	5,237,481	March 2004	4,585,422	652,059	14%	
Hawaii*							Yes
Idaho	April 2008	642,011	April 2004	710,296	-68,285	-10%	Yes
Illinois	February 2008	7,304,563	February 2008	7,137,954	166,609	2%	
Indiana	April 2008	4,988,755	May 2004	4,162,606	826,149	20%	Yes
Iowa	April 2008	2,080,574	April 2004	2,003,415	77,159	4%	
Kansas	May 2008	1,644,572	April 2004	1,535,104	109,468	7%	Yes
Kentucky	April 2008	2,847,152	May 2004	2,706,593	140,559	5%	Yes
Louisiana	April 2008	2,857,347	March 2004	2,775,657	81,690	3%	Yes
Maine	April 2008	1,001,467	January 2004	957,485	43,982	5%	
Maryland	January 2008	3,135,773	February 2004	2,819,928	315,845	11%	Yes
Massachusetts	January 2008	4,011,551	February 2004	3,904,361	107,190	3%	
Michigan	January 2008	7,141,914	July 2004	6,916,340	225,574	3%	
Minnesota*	March 2008	3,091,748					
Mississippi*	April 2008	1,800,000					Yes
Missouri*	March 2008	3,947,438					
Montana	March 2008	619,382	June 2004	595,668	23,714	4%	
Nebraska	April 2008	1,117,063	May 2004	1,087,842	29,221	3%	Yes
Nevada	March 2008	1,031,006	April 2004	856,599	174,407	20%	
New Hampshire	January 2008	885,494	January 2004	715,967	169,527	24%	
New Jersey	February 2008	4,845,847	June 2004	4,624,004	221,843	5%	
New Mexico	January 2008	1,062,951	May 2004	958,379	104,572	11%	Yes
New York	March 2008	11,363,178	March 2004	11,075,460	287,718	3%	
North Carolina	April 2008	5,791,221	May 2004	5,079,830	711,391	14%	Yes
North Dakota*							
Ohio	March 2008	7,754,427	March 2004	7,204,856	549,571	8%	Yes

Oklahoma	January 2008	2,022,537	January 2004	1,938,377	84,160	4%	
Oregon	March 2008	1,996,315	May 2004	1,862,919	133,396	7%	Yes
Pennsylvania	April 2008	8,328,123	April 2004	7,780,582	547,541	7%	Yes
Rhode Island	March 2008	665,091	March 2004	639,459	25,632	4%	Yes
South Carolina	April 2008	2,315,752	February 2004	2,157,442	158,310	7%	
South Dakota	April 2008	548,817	May 2004	517,838	30,979	6%	Yes
Tennessee	February 2008	3,666,824	June 2004	3,532,364	134,460	4%	
Texas	March 2008	12,752,417	March 2004	12,264,663	487,754	4%	Yes
Utah	February 2008	1,319,650	June 2004	1,189,779	129,871	11%	
Vermont	March 2008	421,987	March 2004	403,666	18,321	5%	Yes
Virginia	April 2008	4,670,178	April 2004	4,292,950	377,228	9%	Yes
Washington	February 2008	3,311,503	September 2004	3,279,205	32,298	1%	Yes
West Virginia	April 2008	1,173,179	May 2004	1,103,264	69,915	6%	
Wisconsin*							Yes
Wyoming	April 2008	219,017	March 2004	209,709	9,308	4%	

*Data not available