

Focus on Elections in Douglas County

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Elections Commissioner Dave Phipps recently announced that he is closing half the polling stations in the county. Commissioner Phipps justifies the closures by pointing out that "about one-third of Douglas County voters cast their ballots early" (Moring, 2012, March 19), and the fact voters are asking for government to spend less (Dorland, 2012).

The issue of closing polling stations in Douglas County is important to all Douglas County citizens.

Let's begin by examining the claim that about one-third of Douglas County voters cast their ballots early. Below is found the count of ballots cast in the presidential election or in the governor's election starting in 2000 (Douglas County Election Commission, 2012a). The data are all from the Douglas County Election Commission, Election Results.

Data Summary 1

EARLY VOTE VS TOTAL BALLOTS CAST

2010

BALLOTS CAST - TOTAL.	126,053	(124,663 for governor)
Early Voting	24,381	(for governor)
Early Vote Percentage: 20%		

2008

BALLOTS CAST - TOTAL.	229,215	(226,701 for president)
Early Voting	54,372	(for president)
Early Vote Percentage: 24%		

2006

BALLOTS CAST - TOTAL.	150,880	(147,077 for governor)
Early Voting	28,458	(for governor)
Early Vote Percentage: 19%		

2004

BALLOTS CAST - TOTAL.	209,012	(207,071 for president)
Early Voting	29,197	(for president)
Early Vote Percentage: 14%		

2002

BALLOTS CAST - TOTAL.	120,934	(119,325 for governor)
Early Voting	11,240	(for governor)
Early Vote Percentage: 9%		

2000

BALLOTS CAST - TOTAL.	183,156	(183,156 for president)
Early Voting	5,912	(for president)
Early Vote Percentage: 3%		

A few words of explanation. You will note that after "BALLOTS CAST - TOTAL", there is one number, and then another number in parentheses indicating a total vote for governor or president.

It turns out that not everyone votes for president (or governor); there are other candidates and issues on the ballot. But there does not seem to be a count of total early ballots. There is just a count of early ballots by contest (president, governor, etc.). So to determine a percentage of early votes to total votes cast, I am using the most popular contest, that of president or governor, to establish a percentage of early votes to total votes cast.

Records for the year 2000 do not have a separate breakdown for total votes cast; that year only records the vote per contest.

The increase in popularity of early voting is demonstrated in the data above. The Election Commission records for 2000 still refer to "Hand Count & In Person Voting". As early voting begins to be accepted and even promoted, the count doubles for the next election in 2002. By 2004, the number of early voters reaches its peak except for the year 2008 when get out the vote drives also peaked.

It would accord with the data to say that there is certain group of voters who feel comfortable with early voting and use it habitually in both presidential elections and off-years, since that number stays within a fairly narrow range (24,000 to 29,000 except for 2008) or even declines.

Other factors that can be expected to affect the act of voting are whether an individual can easily get to a polling station. In the urban areas of the County, many voters are accustomed to walk to the nearest voting booth.

With the number of polling stations slashed by half, walking becomes unrealistic for many. And unfortunately, not everyone has a vehicle. Data from the U.S Census Bureau indicates that there are 15,857 occupied housing units with no vehicle available (2010a).

City Councilperson Ben Gray has stated that about 20% in his district are without cars (BET, 2000).

A study by Haspel and Knotts (2005) - as reported by Massey (2012) - "found that even a small increase in the distance between home and the ballot box causes a significant decline in the likelihood that an individual will show up on Election Day. They found that in the typical Atlanta neighborhood, registered voters who lived within a few blocks of their polling places were 10 percentage points more likely to vote than those who lived seven-tenths of a mile from their polling places."

Another consideration is that eliminating nearby polling stations additional burdens to voting on the very poor. There were over 48,000 adults below the poverty line in Douglas County as of 2010¹. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010b) Walking

¹ Number 18 - 64 y/o = 44,220

several miles to a polling place is out of the question, especially if you are taking care of children; and putting a dollar postage on a mail-in ballot might be taking food or medicine away from those same children.

Another fact calling into question the decision to close such a large number of polling places rests on a comparison of Lancaster County and Douglas County. Lancaster county, with a population of 285,407 as of 2010 has 153 polling stations²

Douglas County on the other hand, with a population of 517,110 as of 2010 now has 186 polling stations (Moring, 2012, March 31).

[According to a memo](#), there also seems to have been some questioning on the part of the Secretary of State concerning the actions of the Elections Commissioner.

In this presidential election year, we will also look at the County voting history for the past decade.

What should be evident from Table 1 below (Douglas County Election Commission, 2012b) is that since 2008 there have been more Democrats registered than Republicans.

Voter enthusiasm does not seem to have a significant effect on the number of early voters, except in 2008. It would seem fair to say that the presidential contests in 2000 and 2004 featured two lackluster major candidates, while the 2008 election incorporated a charismatic candidate, a major economic crisis and a symbolic racial shift. Even then, the total voter turnout was only 10% greater than 2004. And voter registration was highest in 2004, not 2008 (see Table 1 below).

Republicans generally vote at a 70% rate or higher; Democrats and Non-Partisans vote at lower rates. A difference in 2008 was that more Democrats and Non-Partisans actually voted (see Table 1 below).

In 2010, it would seem that there was little "Get Out The Vote" activity on the part of Democrats. While Republicans in 2010 voted at the low end of their historical rate, they were still able to swamp the Democratic vote (Republicans: 61,954 to Democrats: 47,266). Independent voters ("Non-Partisan" voters as they are called in Nebraska) voted at a ten-year low (25%) in 2010.

Another point of interest in Table 1 is that the number of registered Non-Partisans

Number >64 = 3,853

Number 18 y/o or older (total) = 48,073

² A call to the Lancaster County Election Commission on April 3, 2012 confirmed that the figure on their website had not been updated to reflect recent polling station closings.

has been steadily increasing since 2000. The number of registered Republicans has been declining since 2004. The number of registered Democrats has held pretty steady from 2004 to 2010, although 2006 showed a significant drop.

VOTING DATA BY YEAR AND PARTY Table 1

AS OF YEAR	Total			DEM		
	VOTER REGISTRATION	VOTE		REGISTERED	VOTED	%
2010	313,264	126,070		125,193	47,266	37.8%
2008	315,185	228,916		127,420	94,471	74.1%
2006	306,875	150,801		115,802	57,701	49.8%
2004	318,347	208,450		124,900	80,707	64.6%
2002	294,022	120,909		118,800	47,440	39.9%
2000	285,785	185,028		117,170	75,393	64.3%

AS OF YEAR	REP			NON-PARTISAN		
	REGISTERED	VOTED	%	REGISTERED	VOTED	%
2010	120,973	61,954	51.2%	66,975	16,776	25.0%
2008	123,315	94,586	76.7%	60,903	38,432	63.1%
2006	129,226	71,985	59.7%	59,035	20,812	35.3%
2004	133,048	94,216	70.8%	57,100	32,029	56.1%
2002	125,371	59,743	47.7%	48,093	13,301	27.7%
2000	121,384	85,593	70.5%	46,445	23,582	50.8%

Conclusion and Recommendations:

The decision to reduce the number of polling stations in Douglas County seems to have been made without much planning or foresight.

The voting process should be made easier, not harder.

Voting by mail should include a postage-paid return envelope. This is little different from paying for polling stations.

Government austerity should not be raised as an argument when it comes to voting.

Based on its steady increase in the number of voters in presidential elections, Douglas County should not have cut back any polling stations. Judging from the evidence so far, it is too soon to say if early voters would significantly reduce the numbers voting at a regular polling station; but absent a herculean effort by political organizations, cutting the number of polling stations will reduce the total number of voters. It is an open secret that the voters thus disenfranchised, the low-income (including many minorities) tend to vote Democrat.

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