



## **ABSENTEE AND EARLY VOTING: TRENDS, PROMISES, AND PERILS**

By John C. Fortier

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“America is undergoing a revolution in voting. ‘Election Day’ is quickly becoming a thing of the past as we move towards a system of many mini-election days leading up to the main event.”

—John C. Fortier in *Absentee and Early Voting*

Most people think Election Day this year will be November 7. But in fact, nearly a quarter of Americans will have voted before that day, either by absentee ballot or at early voting places.

What has happened? Has the convenience of absentee or early voting compromised the integrity of the process? In *Absentee and Early Voting: Trends, Promises, and Perils* (AEI Press, October 2006), AEI research fellow John C. Fortier documents the dramatic increase in absentee voting and, more recently, the meteoric rise in early voting. Fortier traces the historical evolution of these changes across states and analyzes past and future trends. Among his findings:

- Absentee voting arose in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries out of the needs of a more mobile populace seeking to exercise its right to vote. It first originated during the Civil War for soldiers away from home.
- Civilian absentee voting was introduced at the beginning of the twentieth century, but only since the late 1970s have several states, most notably California, begun to ease restrictions on absentee voting and promote its use.
- Twenty-five years ago, only about 5 percent of Americans voted before Election Day by absentee ballot. Since 1980, absentee voting has grown steadily—to 15 percent in 2004—and Election Day has been transformed into a long voting period of several weeks.
- Voting before Election Day at polling places has expanded rapidly since the early 1990s, from almost none to nearly 8 percent of all ballots cast.

Analyzing trends in the 2004 election, Fortier finds that the states break down into four categories: (1) states with very little absentee or early voting (twenty-four states, from Alabama to Wisconsin, plus the District of Columbia); (2) states with significant absentee voting but little or no early voting (eleven states, including California, Iowa, and Wyoming); (3) states with substantial early voting but minimal absentee voting (five states, including North Carolina and Texas); and (4) states that have significant percentages of both absentee and early voting (ten states, including Florida, Hawaii, and New Mexico).

Fortier concludes that the trend toward more voting in advance of Election Day is clear, yet the effects of such a change are not easily foreseen. He finds that the evidence for increased turnout is thin. And while tensions between easier access—granted by absentee, mail voting, and early voting—and lessened security caused by moving away from the protections of a traditional polling place have always existed, Fortier asks whether the convenience of absentee and early voting has compromised the integrity of the election process and weakened a unifying civic experience.

He recommends that states be cautious in moving toward wide-scale absentee voting and also consider early voting at polling places as an alternative.

**John C. Fortier** is a research fellow at AEI, where he serves as the principal contributor to the AEI-Brookings Election Reform Project. Fortier also writes a weekly column on Congress and elections for the *Hill* newspaper, is the author of numerous academic articles in political science and law journals, and has testified before Congress and other private commissions. He is the editor of *After the People Vote: A Guide to the Electoral College* (AEI Press, 2004).

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