

# 2013 Boone Municipal Election Turnout: Measuring the effects of the 2013 Board of Elections changes

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## **Purpose of this Study**

The 2013 changes in Watauga County election procedures and locations by newly appointed Republican representatives produced significant controversy. In particular, opponents argued that the changes would suppress voting, especially in Boone 2 precinct, New River 3 precinct, and among Appalachian State University (ASU) student one-stop voting. Prior to the election, various forms of this claim appeared (in a resolution by the Boone City Council, among other places):<sup>1</sup>

- 1: These changes will suppress voter turnout in Boone.
- 2: The change in the Boone 2 precinct location will suppress student turnout.
- 3: The change in the New River 3 precinct location will suppress turnout.
- 4: Changes to one-stop voting will suppress that vote.

After the election resulted in victory for candidates supported by the Democratic Party, opponents reversed their claim to:

- 5: Activism about vote suppression stimulates voting among the voters supposed to be suppressed.<sup>2</sup>

Vote turnout records provided by the Watauga Board of Elections offers data to test all of these claims.

Voting in 2013 can be compared to voting in earlier elections to measure the change in turnout as evidence of suppression or stimulation. The best comparison for this purpose is the 2009 election. The 2011 Boone city council election was not contested by Republican-supported candidates and turnout was artificially low.<sup>3</sup> The 2009 election is the nearest contested municipal election, offering the closest comparison for 2013.

Comparing the 2009 election to the 2013 election provides clear evidence to reject any claim of voter suppression (#1-4). Opponents implicitly recognized this in their revised claim #5. Nevertheless, rhetorical accusations of vote suppression do appear to sway voters--the increased voter turnout in 2013 was accompanied by a partisan swing to the Democrat-supported candidates. A natural experiment comparing precincts which shifted Republican with those

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<sup>1</sup> Available at: [http://www2.wataugademocrat.com/attachments/2013/08/zpphvBoone\\_resolution.pdf](http://www2.wataugademocrat.com/attachments/2013/08/zpphvBoone_resolution.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> E.g. new Mayor Andy Ball as quoted by *The Nation*: "This result in some ways speaks to the visceral reaction people have when you try to take people's voting rights away." (<http://www.thenation.com/blog/177048/voter-suppression-backfires-north-carolina-spreads-texas#>)

<sup>3</sup> Data to confirm this is available in the 2011 general election abstract of votes from the Watauga Board of Elections.

which shifted Democrat suggest that these effects--increased vote turnout overall, and a surge in Democratic voting--are separate phenomena; the latter did not cause the former.

These results match that of previous research on early voting. In fact, the most recent study on the subject finds that to the contrary, early voting *itself* actually suppresses vote turnout.<sup>4</sup> The reason for this is not clear, but it may be that making Election Day less important reduces voters feelings of a “civic duty” to vote. While some previous studies found a positive effect, a recent analysis by early voting expert Paul Gronke finds that those effects are limited to periods where the novelty of early voting stimulated turnout; as its use became widespread the effect disappeared.<sup>5</sup> Further evidence is provided by a recent study of Minnesota precincts showing that even a reduction in *polling place hours* does not reduce turnout.<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup> 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.

## Data

Data used for this study came from three sources. The first was a full voter history record provided electronically by the Watauga Board of Elections. This is a list of every vote cast in Watauga County since 1990. The second was a paper copy of the certified abstract of votes from the 2009 municipal elections. This provides results for each precinct by race and candidate. The third was a paper abstract of the 2013 results similar to that in 2009.

These two types of records are complementary. The first records who *cast* votes, providing individual level data on voters; the second records who *received* votes, providing precinct level data on partisan support.

## Results

The political science literature predicts that the election procedure changes would not suppress voting, and the empirical analyses bear out that prediction. This study examines each of the five claims in turn. It compares different categories of voter turnout to in 2009 to 2013 to check for

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<sup>4</sup> Barry Burden, et al. “Election Laws, Mobilization, and Turnout: The Unanticipated Consequences of Election Reform” forthcoming in *American Journal of Political Science* (2013).

<sup>5</sup> Paul Gronke, Eva Galanes-Rosenbaum and Peter Miller. “Early Voting and Turnout” *PS: Political Science and Politics* vol. 40 (2007) no. 4. The authors note that early voting only seems to increase turnout in Oregon, which has shifted to an all-mail election system.

<sup>6</sup> Kyle Dropp. “Polling Place Hours and Voter Turnout” unpublished working paper (2012), Ph.D candidate at Stanford University.

<sup>7</sup> Henry Brady and John McNulty. “Turning out to Vote: The Costs of Finding and Getting to the Polling Place” in *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 105 (2011) no. 1 pp. 115-134. Moshe Haspel and H. Gibbs Knotts. “Location, Location, Location: Precinct Placement and the Costs of Voting” in *The Journal of Politics* vol. 67 (2005) no. 2 pp. 560-573.

three possible results: decreases would support claims #1-4 about voter suppression, certain increases would support claim #5 about backlash, and other increases would contradict #5.

**Claim 1: These changes will suppress voter turnout in Boone**

This is the simplest claim to test. Overall turnout data from 2009 were compared to those from 2013 using election abstracts from the Watauga Board of Elections. Overall, turnout in Boone increased by a small amount. This contradicts pre-election claims that the changes would suppress voter turnout.

Table 1: Total turnout in Boone election<sup>8</sup>

	Voters	Votes cast	Turnout %
2009	14265	1697	11.9%
2013	16585	2184	13.2%
Change	+16.3%	+28.7%	

Whether measured in absolute terms (+28.7%) or in relative terms adjusting for the increase in registered voters from 2009 to 2013 (+10.9%), voter turnout increased from 2009 to 2013. This confirms prior research showing that the effects of early voting on turnout are negative, if present at all. There are many possible explanations for this change, but what is certain is that there is no evidence here to support the first claim of voter suppression.

**Claim 2: The change in Boone 2 precinct polling location will suppress voter turnout**

This claim can be tested by comparing turnout at Boone 2 in 2009 relative to that in 2013. Table 2 shows this comparison.

Table 2: Turnout in Boone city election Boone 2 precinct at the polling place<sup>9</sup>

	Voters	Votes cast at precinct	One-stop votes	Total Turnout
2009	3233	47	37	2.6%
2013	3913	111	119	5.9%
Change	+16.3%	+28.7%	+221%	+126%

Across all the Boone precincts, the average turnout change was +41%, but the Boone 2 precinct saw almost triple that increase. Clearly, the location change did not suppress voting. Conversely, the size of this increase does support claim #5. This will be looked at in greater detail below.

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<sup>8</sup> Taken from abstracts of the two elections provide by the Watauga County Board of Elections. These figures exclude votes cast at polling places in Blowing Rock or Beech Mountain (non-Boone municipalities in Watauga County), but they include votes for the Blowing Rock or Beech Mountain elections cast at Boone one-stop locations or early voting. For that reason, they do not match precisely with the results in table 5, taken from voter history data that locates votes by residency, not by where they are cast.

<sup>9</sup> The “One-stop Votes” column includes a small number of transfer voters.

**Claim 3: The change in New River 3 precinct polling location will suppress voter turnout**

Table 3 shows turnout before and after the shift from the National Guard Armory to Mutton Crossing. It also includes the one-stop votes cast by residents of the precinct.

Table 3: Turnout in Boone city election New River 3 precinct at the polling place<sup>10</sup>

	Voters	Votes cast at precinct	One-stop votes	Total Turnout
2009	1772	164	124	16.3%
2013	1860	167	245	22.2%
Change	+5.0%	+1.8%	+98%	+36%

The situation here is more complicated. Overall, the turnout increase was too close to the average to draw meaningful conclusions. On the other hand, the increase in number of votes cast at the polling place was smaller than one would expect based on the averages. Conversely, the increase in one-stop votes was larger than one would expect. The logical interpretation is straightforward and confirms previous research: voters who chose not to vote at the new location successfully voted one-stop instead. Once again, the predicted negative effects are missing.

**Claim 4: Changes to one-stop voting will suppress that vote, particularly among students.**

Changes in early and one-stop voting provoked almost as much controversy as the change in Boone 2's polling place, and theoretically, offered a stronger case for accusations of voter suppression. Table 5, however, clearly shows that there is no evidence to support the accusation.

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<sup>10</sup> The "One-stop Votes" column includes a small number of transfer voters.

**Table 5: Voting method changes in Boone municipal elections, 2009 and 2013.**

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This table compares 2013 to 2009 because the uncontested nature of the 2011 council election correlated with depressed turnout. Showing that turnout increased from 2011 to 2013 would not provide meaningful evidence about the effects of changes by the Board of Elections in 2013.

Precinct	2009						2013					
	Total registered <sup>1</sup>	Vote at polling place <sup>1</sup>	Total voting <sup>2</sup>	Turnout	% Other methods	Total registered <sup>1</sup>	Vote at polling place <sup>1</sup>	Total voting <sup>2</sup>	Turnout <sup>2</sup>	% Other methods		
Blue Ridge	379	41	84	22.1%	51.2%	380	19	93	24.5%	80.0%		
Boone 1	1880	164	281	14.9%	41.6%	1931	170	463	24.0%	63.2%		
Boone 2	3233	47	84	2.6%	44.0%	3913	111	230	5.9%	51.7%		
Brushy Fork	430	3	27	6.2%	88.9%	820	7	33	4.0%	78.8%		
Boone 3	3384	72	125	3.7%	42.4%	4225	84	249	5.9%	66.3%		
New River 1	1741	85	167	9.6%	49.1%	1891	119	264	14.0%	54.9%		
New River 2	1227	87	162	13.2%	46.2%	1379	103	230	16.7%	55.2%		
New River 3	1772	164	288	16.3%	43.1%	1860	167	412	22.2%	59.5%		

1. From the certified abstract of votes, which lists one-stop voting as a separate precinct.

2. From the electronic voter history record, which locates voters by residence, no matter how they cast their ballot. The difference between these two values is the number of voters who used alternative methods (one-stop, early voting, transfer).

This table matches the two sets of data to reveal something that neither does separately. The election abstract shows how many people voted at each precinct polling place. The voter record shows how many voters in each precinct voted--by whatever method. The difference between those two numbers provides a way to measure alternative voting by precinct, which in turn reveals whether the loss of one-stop voting on the ASU campus reduced alternative voting by ASU students.

As shown on the table, alternative voting in precincts dominated by ASU students (Boone 2 and Boone 3) increased in absolute terms and as a percentage of votes cast (by +17.5% and +56.4% in the two precincts). The much smaller precinct of Brushy Fork (the precinct with the lowest average voter age) declined. Overall, it is clear that moving the one-stop voting location from ASU to the county offices had no suppressive effect on student one-stop voting.

As the quotation from Democratic mayor Andy Ball (fn. 2) shows, even opponents of the changes recognize that the pre-election predictions of voter suppression turned out to be wrong. The post-election claim remains to be examined.

**Claim 5: Activism about vote suppression stimulates voting among the voters supposed to be suppressed.**

In practice, opponents of the changes may be using this claim more as moral rhetoric than as a testable thesis, but from a political science perspective the factual basis remains interesting. If it is true, then voter suppression efforts may be naturally self-cancelling and pose little long-term danger. Testing it directly is difficult, but several points in the data offer traction for studying it.

First, the partisan break among students in two precincts suggests that they, at least, reacted negatively to the change (or at the very least, responded positively to the anti-change rhetoric). The following two tables show this:

Table 6: Partisan split Boone 2

	Democrat Mayoral votes	Other votes <sup>11</sup>	Democrat %
2009	21	24	46.7%
2013	74	37	66.7%

Table 7: Partisan split and turnout in Boone 3

	Democrat Mayoral votes	Other votes	Democrat %
2009	33	39	45.8%
2013	48	36	57.1%

In the 2009 elections, the Democratic Party favored candidate (while the election is officially non-partisan, Democratic Party activists clearly indicated which candidate Democratic partisans should vote for) failed to win a majority of students, while the party’s choice received almost 2/3 of those precinct votes in 2013. The same pro-Democratic shift occurred in New River 3, the other precinct with a shifted polling place.

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<sup>11</sup> Both elections saw multiple “non-Democrat” candidates running for mayor, some of whom had unclear ideological stances, so there is no single “Republican” value.

Table 8: Partisan split and turnout in New River 3

	Democrat Mayoral votes	Other votes	Democrat %
2009	63	99	38.9%
2013	93	73	56.8%

Oddly, though, this was not the case in the precinct with the youngest average voter age--Brushy Fork. Still, the small sample size in that precinct suggests that those figures are not reliable and overall the partisan split suggests that a backlash occurred.

**Discussion: A closer look at backlash and turnout**

Whether these changes benefit the Republican Party (as opponents claimed before the election) or the Democratic Party (as they claimed after the election) is unclear, and advocates and opponents of the change disagree over the precise mechanism for the increased turnout. Advocates (typically Republican) claimed that the new locations make access easier; opponents (typically Democrat) claimed that their activism raised a backlash among voters. As evidence for their claims, advocates can point to increased turnout and numbers of one-stop voting and opponents can point to the pro-Democrat partisan break in the results. The reality is that neither claim contradicts the other. Turnout could have increased for both reasons.

Nevertheless, there is a potential counterfactual claim that the backlash accounts for *all* of the turnout increase--potentially, without the opponents' activism turnout might have declined. While counterfactual claims are impossible to test directly, a fortunate natural experiment in the data allows an indirect test this particular claim. As shown above, there is no doubt the backlash effect occurred--the question is whether a distinct overall turnout effect is also visible.

This can be tested by looking at the precincts that shifted pro-Republican in 2013. From 2009 and 2013, the partisan break (in the mayoral election) shifted Republican in two precincts: Blue Ridge and New River 2. If the claim that increased voter turnout is solely due to backlash against the Republican-initiated changes, we would only expect to see turnout increases in areas that shifted Democrat. After all, it makes no sense to say that voters were angry at the Republicans so they voted for the Republicans. On the other hand, if the precincts that shifted Republican showed an increase in turnout, but a smaller increase than in the precincts that shifted Democrat, then we can estimate the relative effects of the two processes.

This comparison is shown in Table 9. The third column shows the (raw, not percent) change in percentage of votes won by the Democrat-recommended candidate; negative numbers reflect an increase in votes for the Republican-recommended candidates(s). The data on partisan breaks are calculated from the election results abstracts; turnout data are taken from voter history records to include early and absentee voters.

Table 9: Partisan break and turnout changes from 2009 to 2013

	Precincts	Partisan Shift	Turnout change
Pro-Republican			
	Blue Ridge	-2.6%	+2.4%
	New River 2	-4.4%	+4.4%
Pro-Democrat			
	Boone 1	+10.6%	+9.1%
	<b>Boone 2</b>	+20.0%	+3.3%
	Boone 3	+11.3%	+2.2%
	New River 1	+18.1%	+4.4%
	<b>New River 3</b>	+17.1%	+5.9%

Bold-face type indicates precincts with new polling places.

On average, Republican shifting districts showed a turnout increase of 3.4%. In Democrat shifting districts, on the other hand, turnout increased by an average of 5.0%.<sup>12</sup> Turnout increased across the board under the new election rules, even among voters who supported the party that instigated the changes. It increased more, albeit marginally, in areas sensitized to the controversy. This result demonstrates that both effects appear to have happened simultaneously.

## Conclusion

From the standpoint of increasing political participation, the 2013 election rules proved superior to the former system. Voter turnout increased across the board, even in both precincts with new polling places. One-stop voting also increased under the new system. Correlation does not prove causation, of course, and this analysis simply shows correlation. Nevertheless, it is clear that there is no evidence of the new system suppressing voter turnout. While that may surprise some in Watauga County, this analysis matches prior research by political scientists elsewhere in the country.

The increase in turnout appears to have had two distinct components. First, there was an overall increase in all precincts (except Brushy Fork, which has too small a total to be statistically meaningful). Second, there was a spike in pro-Democratic votes in the precincts most directly affected by the election procedure changes.

What does this mean for the future? While some may continue to use a rhetoric of vote suppression for political gain, the real story is that it didn't happen. Instead, the political science literature suggests that those truly interested in maximizing voter turnout should turn their attentions to other issues. For example, low quality polling places (confusing signage, poor lighting, poor parking, etc.) have a demonstrable negative effect on turnout.<sup>13</sup> Relatedly, the polling context can also affect voting; polling at schools or churches, for example, increases

<sup>12</sup> A formal t-test comparing turnout changes in the two groups of precincts found that the 1.6% difference was not statistically significant (N=7, p=0.480). This may be a result of the small N, however.

<sup>13</sup> Matt Barreto, Mara Cohen-Marks, and Nathan Woods. "Are All Precincts Created Equal? The Prevalence of Low Quality Precincts in Low-Income and Minority Communities" in *Political Research Quarterly* vol. 62 (2009) no. 3 pp. 445-458.



support for ballot measures relating to those institutions.<sup>14</sup> Providing unbiased, high-quality polling locations is a cause that both parties should support.

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<sup>14</sup>Jeffery Glas. “The Priming Affects of Polling Location on Ballot Initiative Voting Decisions” *Political Science Theses* (2011) Paper 39.