

An Analysis of the 2008 General Election in Spokane County

By

Kevin A Pirch, Ph.D.

Department of Government

Eastern Washington University

kpirch@ewu.edu

The 2008 general election was an exceptional event in the United States and Washington State. At the national level, the election was the culmination of the longest disputed major party primary challenge in decades, resulting in a presidential election campaign which cost almost \$1.4 billion, and involved more voters than any election in U.S. history. With almost 129.5 million voters participating, Barack Obama won the contest with 53 percent of the votes; in Washington State, Obama won 57 percent of the vote with 1.7 million voters selecting him. This, however, was not the only major election in the Evergreen State; in addition to the presidential election, Washington State voters also chose their governor, nine members of the House of Representatives, 98 members of the Washington State House of Representatives, and 25 state senators. Using voter registration data and vote results from the Spokane County Elections Division from the 2008 general election, this study will explore the electorate in Spokane County, including what types of people voted, where those people lived, when they voted, and, generally, what candidates they supported¹.

Who Registered to Vote in Spokane County

Of the 341,000 people over the age of 18 the U.S. Census states lived in Spokane County, 259,000, or 76 percent, were registered to vote in the 2008 general election². Of this group approximately 87,100 were between the ages of 30 and 49, while 75,000 were between the ages

¹ Special thanks to Professor Patricia Crowley, Department of Computer Sciences, Gonzaga University, for technical assistance with the data sets.

² It is important to note that this does not mean that 76 percent eligible of Spokane County voters registered to vote. The Census figure includes people who are not eligible to vote in Washington State including non-citizens, those who are declared to be mentally incompetent, and those who have committed a felony and not had their voting rights restored. While it is not known what percentage of people over the age of 18 are not eligible to vote in Spokane County, it is estimated that 90 percent of the voting age population is eligible to vote in the State of Washington. Applying this to Spokane County, approximately 84 percent of eligible residents registered to vote in Spokane County.

of 50 and 64 years old. This is, generally, keeping with the demographic breakdown of Spokane County residents as a whole, where the median age was 34.1, and 39 percent of the population was between 35 and 64. Additionally, there were 49,600 registered voters over the age of 65 and 48,100 registered voters in the county under the age of 30. Simply put, the age of registered voters roughly compared to the distribution of the age of residents in Spokane County. However, this was not the case with respects to gender among registered voters in the County. While women made up about 50.8 percent of the population in the County, they made up 54 percent of the registered voters, while men made up 46 percent of the registered voters. Taken together, the largest single bloc of registered voters in Spokane County was women between the ages of 30 and 49.

Table I

Breakout of Registered Voters in Spokane County by Age and Sex

	18-29 years old	30-49 years old	50-64 years old	65 and older
Female	25,739 (9.9%)	46,247 (17.9%)	39,389 (15.2%)	28,004 (10.8%)
Male	22,078 (8.5 %)	40,606 (15.7%)	35,210 (13.6%)	21,576 (8.3%)

Figures in each cell represent the total number of people in that group and the percent of all registered voters who fit that demographic

In addition to examining registered voters by age and gender, we also explore more about Spokane County voters by examining where they lived. Of those registered to vote in 2008, 43 percent, or 111,600 people, lived in the city of Spokane. Or, looking at this another way, approximately 73 percent of the total population of the city over the age of 18 registered to vote in 2008. In the County's second largest city, Spokane Valley, 47,500 – or 84.4 percent of the city's eligible population registered to vote. The other municipalities in the county – Liberty

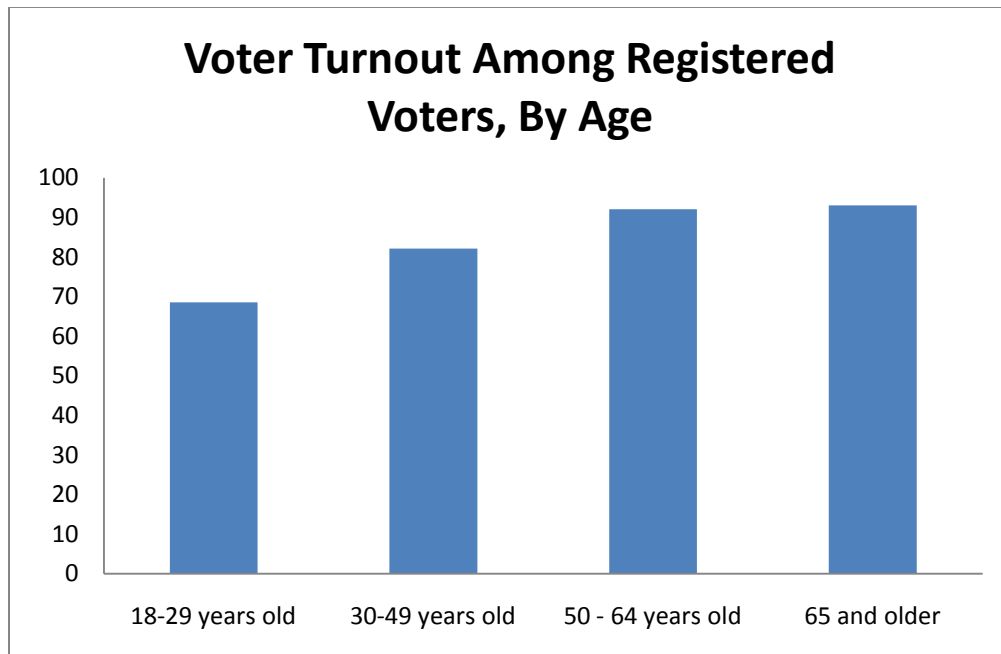
Lake, Cheney, Airway Heights, Deer Park, and other communities – had 15,200 registered voters or 5.2 percent of the total registered voters in the county. Unincorporated areas in the county were home to 88,000 registered voters (34 percent of all registered voters in the county).

Who Voted in 2008?

A vast tract of research in political science has demonstrated that not all people who are registered to vote will exercise their franchise; rather, people in some socioeconomic or demographic groups are more likely to vote. Generally speaking, in the United States, people who vote tend to have higher income, more formal education, and are older than those who do not vote. Additionally, those who have strong partisan predispositions and have a history of voting are also more likely to vote than those who are political independents. In many regards, Spokane County was no exception to the national norm. In the state of Washington, 84.1 percent of the registered voters exercised their franchise and in Spokane County 85.8 percent of the registered voters voted – the highest rate of the four most populous counties in the state.

While the County had an exceptionally high turnout rate, there were some variables predictive of who voted in 2008. One of the most striking differences between voters and non voters is defined by age. Although they made up 48 percent of the registered voters in the county, people over the age of 50 made up 52 percent of the voters in the 2008 general election. While registered voters under the age of 30 comprised 19 percent of the registered voters, they only made up 15 percent of the electorate.

Graph I



In addition to finding older residents were more likely to vote compared to younger voters, there was a difference between the genders when it comes to voting in Spokane County. In the 2008 general election, 54.4 percent of the voters were women and 45.6 percent of the voters were men. However, this discrepancy was more a function of the fact that women in Spokane County were more likely to register to vote than men, rather than men registering to vote and then not voting. Of the men in the county who registered to vote, 84 percent voted in the election, while 85.6 percent of the women who were registered to vote mailed in their ballots. Simply put, Spokane County women voted in greater numbers because they registered in greater numbers, with fewer men than women voting in every age cohort. Again, just like registered voters, the largest single population of voters in the county was women between the age of 30

and 49, who made up 17.5 percent of the entire electorate while the smallest group was men under the age of 30 who made up only 6.7 percent of the electorate.

Table II
Spokane County Voters by Age and Sex

	18-29 years old	30-49 years old	50-64 years old	65 and older
Female	18,202 8.3%	38,442 17.5%	36,482 16.7%	25,852 11.8%
Male	14,589 6.7%	33,022 15.1%	32,240 14.7%	20,265 9.2%

Another disparity found in voting occurred when examining voting by geographical areas. Here it appears people who live in certain communities are less likely to vote compared to other areas. When it came to specific precincts, the highest level of voter turnout occurred in the far southern and southwestern reaches of the city of Spokane and in the unincorporated areas of Spokane County just south of the city of Spokane Valley. In all of these areas, the voter turnout rate was around 95 percent. The lowest levels of voter participation occurred in Fairchild Air Force Base, in areas of downtown Spokane, and west central Spokane. In these areas voter turnout averaged around 65 percent.

However, in the general election of 2008 a larger percentage of people who lived in unincorporated Spokane County voted than in any of the municipal areas. In rural areas, 86.5 percent of registered voters voted, compared to 84 percent in Spokane Valley, 83.3 percent in Spokane, and 82.7 percent in the county's other municipal areas – including Liberty Lake, Airway Heights, Cheney, and other communities. Had the more populous areas of the county voted at the same rate as the rural areas, Spokane County would have had approximately 5,371 more voters including 3,500 more in the city of Spokane.

The Partisan Makeup of Spokane County

In addition to examining age, sex, and location of voters in the County, we should determine whether partisan disposition of the voters had any influence on the decision to vote in Spokane County during the general election. There are a number of different factors which could be at play when explaining partisan patterns in the decision to vote. First, there is a substantial body of academic literature which indicates that Republicans are more likely to turn out and vote compared to Democrats. In addition, Republicans might have been engaged in the gubernatorial race which featured a rematch of Governor Christine Gregoire and Republican challenger Dino Rossi which produced an exceptionally close race in 2004. However, Democrats also might have mobilized during the 2008 campaign with both a popular presidential candidate and a spirited governor's race.

While it is impossible to determine how an individual voter voted, using precinct level results of both the governor's race and the presidential contest, it is possible to determine if certain regions of the county were more Democratic or Republican³. By examining all of the precincts where both Obama and Gregoire won compared to those precincts which both John McCain and Rossi won, it might be possible to determine if there is a partisan difference in voter turnout.

³ Ballots in Spokane County are placed in two separate envelopes, the first has the voter's signature which is verified against registration records. After that signature is confirmed, the first envelope is removed and the ballot remains in the second, secrecy envelope until the ballots are counted. This system is designed to allow a confirmation of voters while keeping a person's vote secret.

Of the 283 precincts in Spokane County, both Obama and Gregoire won majorities in 115 precincts (or 40 percent). Of those 115 precincts, 103 were in the city of Spokane – where the two Democrats won every precinct in the 3rd legislative district. Democrats also won in the city of Cheney, Spokane Valley, and Millwood. However, while doing well in the cities, Democratic candidates did not fair very well in unincorporated Spokane County where the two candidates only won in two precincts (both of which are urban areas directly north of the city of Spokane).

Demographically, it appears that Democratic regions of the county in the 2008 general election tended to be less middle aged, more female, and less likely to vote than other regions of the county. Of the approximately 103,000 people who registered to vote in Democratic precincts in Spokane County, 21.4 percent were under the age of 30 compared to 18.5 percent of the entire county. While 19.2 percent of the county’s registered voters were over the age of 65, 19.9 percent of registered voters in Democratic precincts were over the age of 65. Additionally, slightly more than 62 percent of the population in the county were between 30 and 64, only 58.8 percent of the population was Democratic precincts were in this cohort. With regards to sex, in Democratic precincts women made up more than 55 percent of the registered voters, one percent more than the county as a whole. Finally, people in Democratic precincts turned out at a lower rate than the county as a whole with only 82.4 percent of the registered voters voting and substantially less than Republican precincts where 86.2 percent of the registered voters voted.

Table III

Voting by Age and Sex in Democratic Precincts

	19-29 years old	30-49 years old	50-64 years old	65 and older
Female	8,457 10%	14,234 16.8%	13,370 15.8%	11,344 13.4%
Male	6375 7.5%	12230 14.5%	10,980 13%	7,505 8.9%

In addition, there were a number of precincts that were strongly supportive of Democratic candidates, as defined by both Gregoire and Obama receiving more than 60 percent of the vote. In these precincts – which were almost exclusively in the city of Spokane – the voting rate was similar to that of other Democratic precincts, at 82.4 percent. However, these precincts were composed of younger registered voters than the county as a whole.

Table IV
Strongly Democratic Precincts by Age and Sex

	18-29 year olds	30-49 year olds	50-64 year olds	65 and older
Female	3,666 (12.5%)	4,958 (16.9%)	4,337 (14.8%)	3,156 (10.7%)
Male	2,974 (10.1%)	4,521 (15.4%)	3,784 (12.9%)	1,986 (6.8%)

While Democratic candidates tended to do better in more urban regions of Spokane County, Republicans dominated unincorporated Spokane County. Additionally, Republicans won all of the precincts in Liberty Lake, the towns of southern Spokane County including Spangle, Rockford, and Fairfield. Republicans also won a majority of the precincts in Spokane Valley, winning in 35 of the 42 precincts in the city, and also won a few precincts in the southern and northern portion of the city of Spokane. Demographically speaking, regions that supported Republican candidates are different than those who supported Democratic candidates. Unlike, Democratic trending precincts, Republican precincts tend to be more middle age than Democratic precincts.

Table V
Republican Precincts by Age and Sex

	18-29 year olds	30-49 years old	50-64 years old	65 and old
Female	11,939 (8.6%)	25,488 (18.4%)	22,011 (15.9%)	13,401 (9.7%)
Male	10,810 (7.8%)	22,372 (16.1%)	20,687 (14.9%)	11,880 (8.6%)

Factors Explaining Voting in Spokane County

While there are differences in voting patterns in Spokane County based on a myriad of factors, it is important to determine which of these variables was the more powerful in explaining the decision to vote in the 2008 general election. Using a multivariate OLS regression analysis, this study explores which variables most significantly explain the decision to vote in the 2008 general election⁴. Specifically, this study will examine the age of the voters, their gender, where the voter lives, and the partisan make-up of their precinct⁵.

In this model, the strongest predictor of a person's decision to vote in the 2008 election in Spokane County was the voter's age, with older residents significantly more likely to vote than younger residents. In addition to this, women also were significantly more likely to vote than men. Because decades of previous research at the national level have produced similar results it is not exceptionally surprising to find that older people tend to vote more than young people and that women are more likely to vote than men. However, when looking at the

⁴ The following equation was used to estimate the model:

$$Y = \alpha + \beta_1x_1 + \beta_2x_2 + \dots + \beta_{10}x_{10} + \epsilon$$

Where x_1 = age; x_2 = male; x_3 = Spokane; x_4 = Spokane Valley; x_5 = other cities; x_6 = toss up precinct; x_7 = Strongly Democratic precinct; x_8 = majority Democratic precinct; x_9 = majority Republican precinct; and x_{10} = unincorporated Spokane County.

⁵ A more detailed description of the variables used can be found in appendix A.

geographical variables, only two have a positive impact on predicting a person's decision to vote. Those who lived in a precinct which is strongly partisan – that is the voters in the precinct supported both the presidential and gubernatorial candidates of a particular party with more than 60 percent of the vote – were more likely to vote, while people who lived in more closely contested regions were less likely to vote. In some regards, this fact does go against much of the understanding of voting behavior in the United States, where more competitive elections tend to bring out more voters. However, in Spokane County in the 2008 general election, when looking at the precinct level returns the exact opposite occurred. In those regions which were highly competitive and each candidate had a reasonable chance of winning, or in places where a large number of people who are willing to vote for both Democrats and Republicans live voter turnout was lower than in places with a more homogenous partisan make up.

Table IV
Variables in Voting in Spokane County

Constant	0.743** (0.006)
Age	0.083** (0.001)
Male	-0.015** (0.001)
Spokane	-0.071** (0.006)
Spokane Valley	-0.101** (0.006)
Other cities	-0.066** (0.005)
Tossup	-0.019** (0.003)
Strong Democratic	0.006** (0.002)
Strong Republican	0.017** (0.002)
Democratic	-0.044** (0.003)
Republican	0.000** (0.000)
Rural	-0.081** (0.006)
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R ² = 0.058	N= 258848
	** p<0.01

Standard deviations in parenthesis

A Closer Look at the City of Spokane

As the largest city in the county, and the second largest city in the state, it is important to understand the voting patterns in the city. Most notably, the city of Spokane is different from much of the rest of the county in its partisan makeup. Most precincts in the city supported the Democratic candidates, and in the 3rd legislative district, Democrats won all precincts. However, that does not mean that the city is monolithic in nature, and there are important dynamics which occur in the Lilac City. Geographically, the city of Spokane will be divided into three separate areas – South Spokane, North Spokane, and Downtown. South Spokane is composed of the area south of 7th Avenue, Downtown includes areas north of 7th Avenue and south of Mission Avenue and includes the city center and Gonzaga University, and North Spokane includes everything in the city north of Mission Avenue.

Among those who live in the southern portion of Spokane the voter turnout rate was 85.3 percent, the highest rate of the city. However, the voters of south Spokane are not uniform in their politics. Those who live in the 3rd Legislative District (which, generally speaking, encompasses all of the area north of 17th Avenue) voter turnout was 80.5 percent, while the portion of south Spokane which lies in the 6th Legislative District (which covers the far southern and western ends of Spokane) had a turnout rate of 87.6 percent. This section had the highest voter turnout in the city.

Compared to southern Spokane, voter turnout in northern Spokane was 82 percent. Again, like in southern Spokane voter turnout was higher in the 6th District (85.6 percent) compared to the 3rd District (78.1 percent), meaning that voters who lived north of Francis in Spokane were significantly more likely to vote than those who lived south of that boundary.

While in downtown Spokane, the voter turnout was 76.6 percent, the lowest voter turnout in the city.

When People Voted

With the advent of the vote-by-mail system, the 2008 General Election was unlike any Spokane County had ever experienced before. While this had been used in previous elections in the county, it had never been implemented in a year with the presidential and gubernatorial election. Functionally, vote-by-mail is operated through the Spokane County Elections Division, which begins mailing out ballots 20 days before the election. Voters vote at their convenience, and may mail in these ballots via the U.S. Postal Service, drop them off at the elections office, or return them to drop boxes located throughout the county.⁶ The practical implications of this are that citizens, if they so choose, may vote and return their ballot on the day which they receive it, which could be as early as two and a half weeks before the campaign is over. In effect, for the campaigns, there is a rolling deadline with which they must reach voters before they have voted and campaign resources used after voters have voted is a wasted effort. Simply put, campaigning on Election Day (or the day before) might be moot if the majority of voters have already cast their votes long before that time.

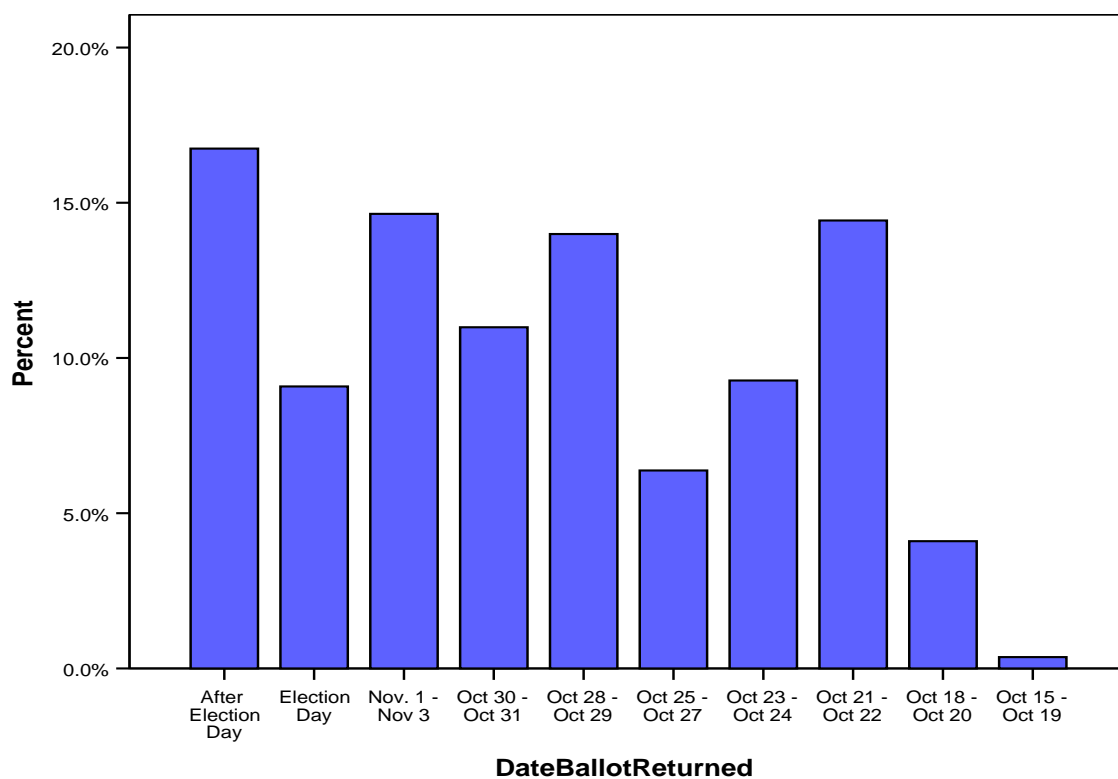
Unlike electoral rules where everyone votes at the same time, a critical question for candidates and their campaigns in a vote-by-mail system is when should campaign resources be used to maximize their effect on the election? In exploring this question, this section will look at the time most ballots were received by the elections division and if there are any patterns which emerged in the 2008 election regarding who voted when. Initially, it is clear the majority of

⁶ Additionally, on Election Day voters are allowed to bring their ballots to a Voter Service Center and vote there if they would like.

voters did not wait until Election Day to return their ballots to the state and that a majority of voters actually turned in their ballots long before the campaign was over. In Spokane County, almost 75 percent of voters returned their ballots before Election Day, and almost half of the voters had returned their ballots before October 29, six days before the election.

Graph II

Percent of Ballots Returned By Date

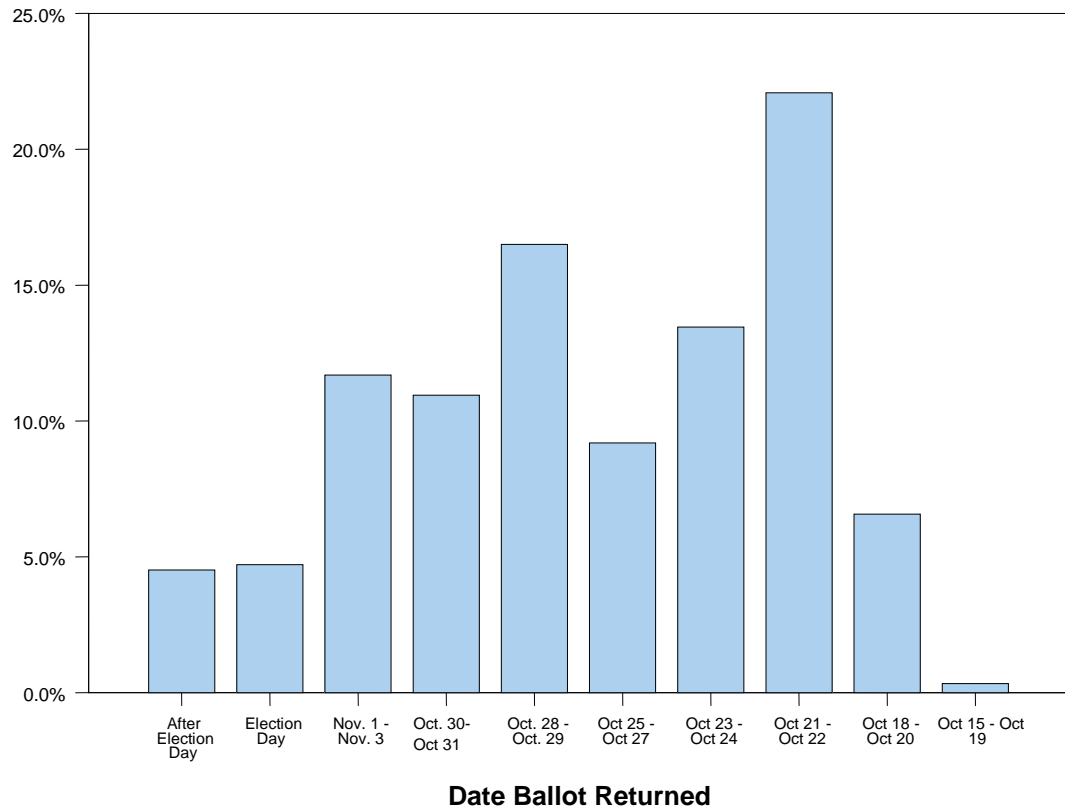


Rather than seeing most voters hold their ballots until Election Day, the Election Division received ballots in four major waves. The first wave came between October 21 and 22, the Tuesday and Wednesday two weeks before the actual election. During these two days 12.2

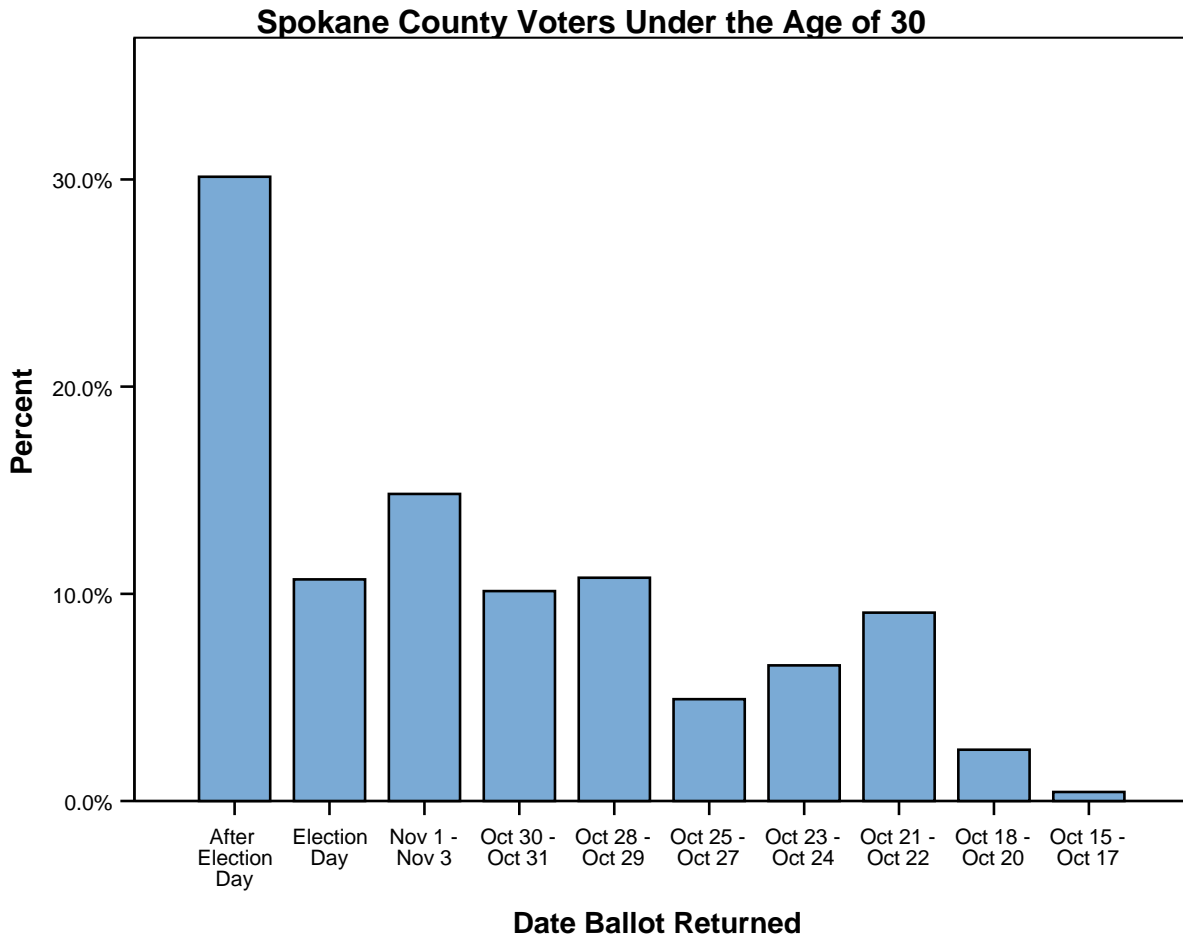
percent of all voters returned their ballots. The next major wave of ballot returns came on the 28th and 29th of October, when 11.8 percent of the voters turned in their ballots. On the Monday before Election Day, 12.4 percent of the ballots were turned in and finally the Election Division received 14.2 percent of the ballots after Election Day.⁷ While there were some important implications concerning the fact that a majority of Spokane County voters voted a week before the election, it also is important to note there were major differences concerning who voted when. Like the decision to vote, there were dramatic differences among different age groups regarding when they voted. Among those over the age of 65 there is a strong tendency to turn in the ballot earlier, while younger voters appeared to hold on to their ballots until later in the campaign.

⁷ The state is required to accept ballots turned in after Election Day so long as they were postmarked on that day. The majority of ballots were received on Wednesday or Thursday of that week however the latest one was received was November 24th, 2008.

Date Ballot Returned for Spokane County Voters over the age of 65, by percent



Among those voters who were 65 years or older, there was a strong tendency to turn in their ballots early. In total, approximately 23 percent of the voters 65 and older turned in their ballots on October 21st and 22nd, almost two weeks before the campaign concluded and more than 60 percent of these voters had returned their ballots while there still was a week to go in the campaign. This is in stark contrast to how long the youngest voters in Spokane County held on to their ballots. Of those under the age of 30, there was a strong tendency to not vote until very close to Election Day.



Among Spokane County voters under the age of 30, almost 40 percent did not turn in their ballots until Election Day or later. An additional 13 percent turned their ballots in on the Monday before Election Day, meaning that the majority of young people held on to their ballots until the last weekend before submitting their vote. This pattern continues with those between the ages of 30 and 49 turning in their ballots, generally, slightly before those under the age of 30 and those 50 to 64 years of age turning their ballots in after those who are older. Simply put, the younger a voter in Spokane County was, the longer they held on to their ballot.

Additionally, there appears to be other factors which would lead people to turn in their ballots earlier. Looking at other variables such as geographic location, partisanship of specific

precincts, and the sex of the voter have specific impact on the decision about when to vote. First, the most powerful predictor of voting early in Spokane County in 2008 was age. Those voters who were over the age of 65 were more likely to vote early compared to younger voters. In addition, all other things being equal, voters in cities in Spokane County tended to vote earlier than those who lived in unincorporated Spokane County – this is especially true of voters in Spokane Valley and Spokane. Additionally, voters in Democratic, strongly Republican, and strongly Democratic precincts also tended to voter earlier in the campaign. Finally, men were also slightly more likely to vote early compared to women.

Variables in When People Voted in Spokane County	
Constant	3.281** (0.046)
Age	0.679** (0.005)
Male	0.035** (0.011)
Spokane	0.079** (0.019)
Spokane Valley	0.182** (0.017)
Other cities	0.035 (0.024)
Tossup	0.050* (0.024)
Strong Democratic	0.079** (0.019)
Strong Republican	0.044** (0.016)
Democratic	0.150** (0.019)
Republican	0.000 (0.000)
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R ² = 0.070	N= 218918
* p<0.05	** p<0.01
Standard deviations in parenthesis	

Because vote-by-mail is such a relatively new system, there is no comprehensive research regarding the decision of when to vote. As such there are no readily available hypothesis

concerning why older voters might vote before younger voters. Additionally, because this is the first major campaign exclusively conducted in the county with the vote-by-mail system, it is impossible to know if this is unique to the particular circumstances of this election, or if this is part of a general pattern. However, the fact that different types of people tend to turn in the ballots at different times have serious consequences for how campaigns should be conducted in Spokane County.

In total nearly 44,500 voters, or 19 percent, of all of the voters in Spokane County voted two weeks before the actual Election Day and almost 106,500 voters (48.5 percent of the total) had cast their ballot with one week left to go in the campaign. What this means for candidates and their campaigns is that the final weekend push of heavy campaigning – on the streets, in malls, on the radio and television – might not be the most effective use of their resources. This is especially true given the fact that campaigns traditionally target those people who are presumed to vote (older, wealthier individuals). Among this group, the vast majority who are planning to vote already have. Simply put, many campaigns might be campaigning when, and to whom, the election is effectively over.

Appendix A

Variable description

Male: Male =1; Female =0

Age: Age 65 and older =4; Age 50-64 =3; Age 30-49=2; Age 18 – 29 =1

Spokane: Residing in the City of Spokane =1; Otherwise = 0

Spokane Valley: Residing in the City of Spokane Valley = 1; Otherwise =0

Other cities: All incorporated areas in Spokane County excluding Spokane and Spokane Valley =1; Otherwise = 0

Tossup: Precincts which split the vote between Democrats and Republicans in the presidential and gubernatorial elections = 1; otherwise = 0.

Strong Democratic: Precincts where the Democratic presidential and gubernatorial candidates received more than 65 percent of the vote = 1; all other precincts =0

Strong Republican: Precincts where the Republican presidential and gubernatorial candidates received more than 65 percent of the vote = 1; all other precincts =0

Democratic: Precincts where the Democratic presidential and gubernatorial candidates received more than 50 percent of the vote = 1; all other precincts =0

Democratic: Precincts where the Democratic presidential and gubernatorial candidates received more than 50 percent of the vote = 1; all other precincts =0