

# VCS JOURNAL

## **Some Analysis of Absentee and Early Voting in Hawaii in the 2004 General Election**

Across the country absentee and early voting has become a growing trend. In some localities entire elections are now held with only mail in ballots. In most cases, however, the election is a mix of Election Day polling place voting and various forms of early balloting. Campaigns are starting to consider that their late campaign activities are lost on the growing electorate that has already voted by Election Day. They are thinking of how to get their message to those early voters early, before they do vote. A key question then becomes how can one get some idea who might be an early/absentee voter?

In his groundbreaking 2003 book, *The New Political Targeting*, Hal Malchow covered the subject in Chapter 9 "Targeting Absentee and Early Voters" (pp161-178). Malchow concludes that past early/absentee voting is a good indicator of current early/absentee voting, but beyond that there don't appear to be any reasonably effective models available.

This study looks at the specifics of this situation for the 2004 General Election in Hawaii. Hawaii offers both early and absentee balloting, without any reason required of the voter. The clerks record early/absentee usage on their voter files, but do not code which form was used. The state lists 133,782 early/absentee ballots cast for this election (31% of ballots cast). On the other hand our February, 2006 Hawaii State voter file lists 141,404 voters who used early/absentee voting for this election. The difference is due to the fact that the clerks record everyone who votes early or requests an absentee ballot as voting absentee, whether they return the absentee ballot or not. The difference is not large, nor is it really germane to the subject under study.

The first step was to count the number of voters who used early/absentee for the 2004 General by all combinations of early/absentee usage for the 2002 Primary, 2002 General and 2004 Primary. Those counts showed the following:

If you took early/absentee voting for all 3; the 2002 Primary, 2002 General, and 2004 Primary, your chance of voting early/absentee in the 2004 General was 97%. These voters covered 27% of those who choose early/absentee for the 2004 General.

If you took early/absentee voting for any of the 3; the 2002 Primary or 2002 General or 2004 Primary, your chance of voting early/absentee in the 2004 General was 68%. These voters covered 74% of those who choose early/absentee for the 2004 General.

If you never took early/absentee voting in the 2002 Primary or 2002 General or 2004 Primary, your chance of voting early/absentee in the 2004 General was 9%. These voters covered the remaining 26% of those who choose early/absentee for the 2004 General.

Then we looked at those who used early/absentee voting for the 2000 elections. There were 27,668 voters who used early/absentee voting for the 2000 elections but had not chosen early/absentee in 2002 or for the 2004 Primary election. Of these 12% chose early/absentee voting for the 2004 General, bringing the total coverage to 74%.

We were not able to find any demographic similarities between the first time early/absentee voters in the 2004 General Election, confirming Malchow's finding that not much other than previous early/absentee usage works for predicting early/absentee usage.

Finally we plotted a graph of diminishing returns in the usage of past early/absentee usage in predicting current usage. Starting at the left we have accuracy and coverage points for those who used early/absentee voting for all three of the previous elections, labeled **All 3**. As noted above, that covered 27% of the 2004 General early/absentee users, with an accuracy of 97%. To those who always voted early/absentee we add any remaining voters who used early/absentee voting in the 2004 Primary, but not both elections in 2002, labeled **Add 4P**. This brought coverage to 57% with accuracy remaining high at 90%. In a similar way we add those who used early/absentee in at least the 2002 General, labeled **Add 2G**, then those who used at least 2002 Primary early/absentee, labeled **Add 2P**. Then finally those who used early/absentee 2000, but not since, labeled **Add 00**. After all were added coverage was up to 74%, but accuracy was down to 62%.

The big payoff is for using those who took early/absentee voting in either the 2002 General or the 2004 Primary. That group covered 71% of those who used early/absentee voting in the 2004 General. This group had a good efficiency rate, as 70% of them once again voted early/absentee in the 2004 General. From there you can see the coverage rises very slowly while efficiency is lost.

It appears that early/absentee voting, like voting in general, becomes somewhat of a habit. Over the 2000 to 2004 period the use of early/absentee voting in general elections in Hawaii grew from 19.7% of the vote to 31% of the votes cast. Hawaii is fairly new to unrestricted early/absentee voting. In California people have been able to use absentee voting without any specific reason for over 20 years. In the 2004 General Election 32.6% of all votes in California were cast by early/absentee voting, so we might expect that the Hawaii figure will stabilize between 30 and 40% of all ballots cast.

These are large and important portions of the electorate, and they are growing. Learning to plan a campaign around early/absentee voting is becoming an increasingly important part of winning.

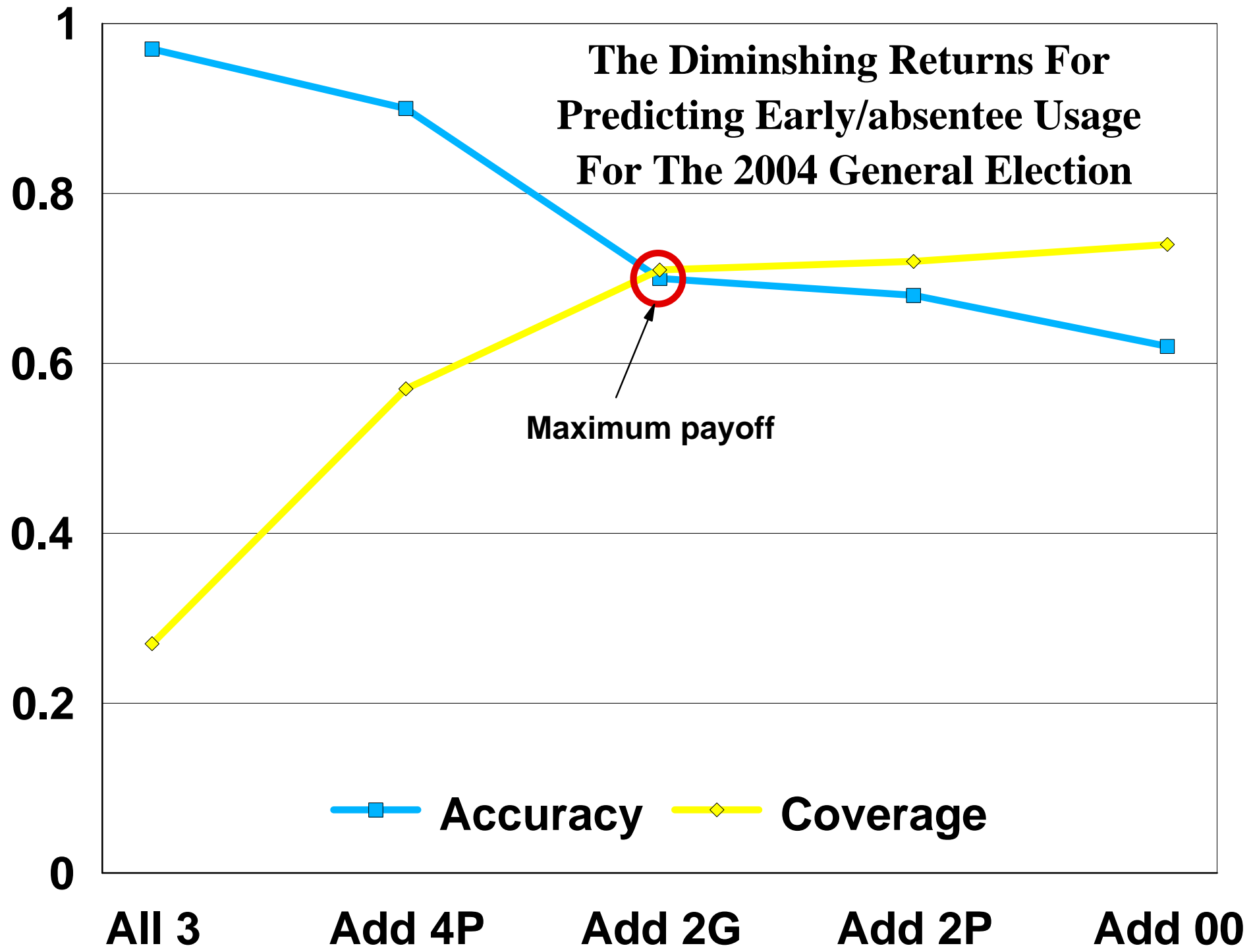
Bill Daly  
Chairman of the Board  
Voter Contact Services

Dr. Robert Hughes  
Professor of Sociology  
University of Colorado at Col Springs      3/13/2006

Note: This is a fairly simple and straightforward analysis of early/absentee voting. For more in depth consideration of early/absentee voting and campaign model construction in general we recommend Hal Malchow's book, *The New Political Targeting*. You can download the chapter on absentee voting at no charge from their website,

<http://www.mshcdirect.com/target/bookdownload.html>

# The Diminishing Returns For Predicting Early/absentee Usage For The 2004 General Election



Maximum payoff

Accuracy Coverage