Both parties confident that pre-Election Day voting will pay off

By Christine Stapleton
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Whatever the motivation was behind cutting the number of days for early voting, the result was this: fewer Democrats made it to the polls than in 2008 but more Republicans waited in long lines this year to get their vote in early.

In 2008, Democrats made up 61.1 percent of the 144,545 early ballots in Palm Beach County. This year, that percentage dropped to 55.3 percent. That is 18,970 fewer Democratic voters than four years ago.

As for Republicans, who have historically preferred absentee to early voting, 2,183 more cast early votes this year.

Statewide, the total number of early ballots cast was also down, from 2.6 million in 2008 to 2.4 million this year. Democrats cast 46 percent of those ballots while Republican made up 35.8 percent of the voters statewide. Party turnout statistics for the 2008 election were not available.

“We’re very happy with the results of early voting,” said Sid Dinerstein, chairman of the Palm Beach County Republican Party. Although Republicans currently trail Democrats by three points, four years ago Democrats were up 9 points at going into Election Day, Dinerstein said, adding that independent voters are swinging Republican.

Early voting began in 2004, in response to the epic voting confusion in the November 2000 election. Promoted as a benign practice to ease long lines on election day, early voting has morphed into a partisan battlefield. GOP proponents believed early voting would give Republican voters, many of whom vote absentee, another means to cast their ballots before the election.

“The general belief was that it would benefit Republicans,” said Kevin Wagner, a lawyer and political scientist at Florida Atlantic University. “But it didn’t turn out that way.”

Democrats, who traditionally shunned absentee voting, embraced early voting. In the November 2008 election, Democrats cast 61.2 percent of the county’s 144,545 early ballots. Republicans made up just 18.7 percent.
In 2011, Florida’s GOP-controlled legislature cut the number of early voting days from 14 to 8 and gave the state’s 67 Supervisors of Elections the right to also cut the cumulative number of hours from 92 to 48. The law also eliminated the second Sunday of early voting — which historically enabled “Souls to the Polls” efforts to encourage black voters to early-vote after church.

Opponents claimed the changes were a veiled attempt to reduce Democratic turnout.

The final numbers released on Monday confirm that fewer Democratic voters cast early ballots. However Democrats responded to the Republican-backed cuts to early voting by pushing Democrats to vote absentee. The intention was to offset the loss of early votes with an increase in absentee ballots, said Mike Coleman, a Democratic activist in Boca Raton who specializes in analyzing voting data for the party.

“We understood in November 2010 that early voting would not be like it had been,” Coleman said. “We set a goal of 60,000 absentee ballots for Palm Beach County. At this point we have 77,000 requested.”

Already, 53,241 have been returned, according to the Palm Beach County Supervisor of Elections. Statewide, preliminary data show an increase in absentee ballots cast by Democrats. That number will rise as more absentee ballots are processed Tuesday.

Whether the cuts to early voting will impact the outcome of the election is not known. But there is one thing that both parties agree upon: the changes resulted in more-motivated voters.

“They were successful only as a way to suppress turnout due to shortening early voting,” Coleman said. “But people are going to vote. People went around it. People voted absentee.”

Dinerstein said Republican are equally motivated.

“We are broken-glass Republicans,” Dinerstein said. “We will walk over glass to win this election.”

Jane Musgrave contributed to this report.