

# Can Experience Mitigate Partisanship? The Effect of Voting by Mail on Voter Fraud Beliefs

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## **Abstract**

Does experience with voting by mail reduce mail-in voter fraud beliefs? Can personal experience counter partisan forces when the two conflict? I answer these questions by examining mail-in voter fraud beliefs in a single-state study following the 2020 presidential election, in which mail-in voter fraud became a more intense political and partisan issue. I focus on the ways in which partisan affiliation and personal experience may shape voters' attitudes about mail-in voter fraud. Building on Zaller's (1992) RAS model and Cramer and Toff's (2017) framework of personal experience, I develop a theory to explain how firsthand experience can mitigate partisanship. Using OLS regression and instrumental variable analyses to test this theory, I find suggestive, causal evidence that voting by mail decreases beliefs about the prevalence of voter fraud. My results also confirm that affiliation with the Republican Party increases voter fraud beliefs. Including an interaction effect in the analysis provides no support for my hypothesis that the effect of voting by mail is conditioned on partisanship. I conclude from these findings that voting by mail can indeed mitigate the effect of partisanship on beliefs about fraud, despite the strength of partisan ties and polarization of the current political era. I consider the potential policy implications of these findings and argue that efforts to combat misinformation about mail-in voter fraud should consider interventions that increase voters' experience with voting by mail.

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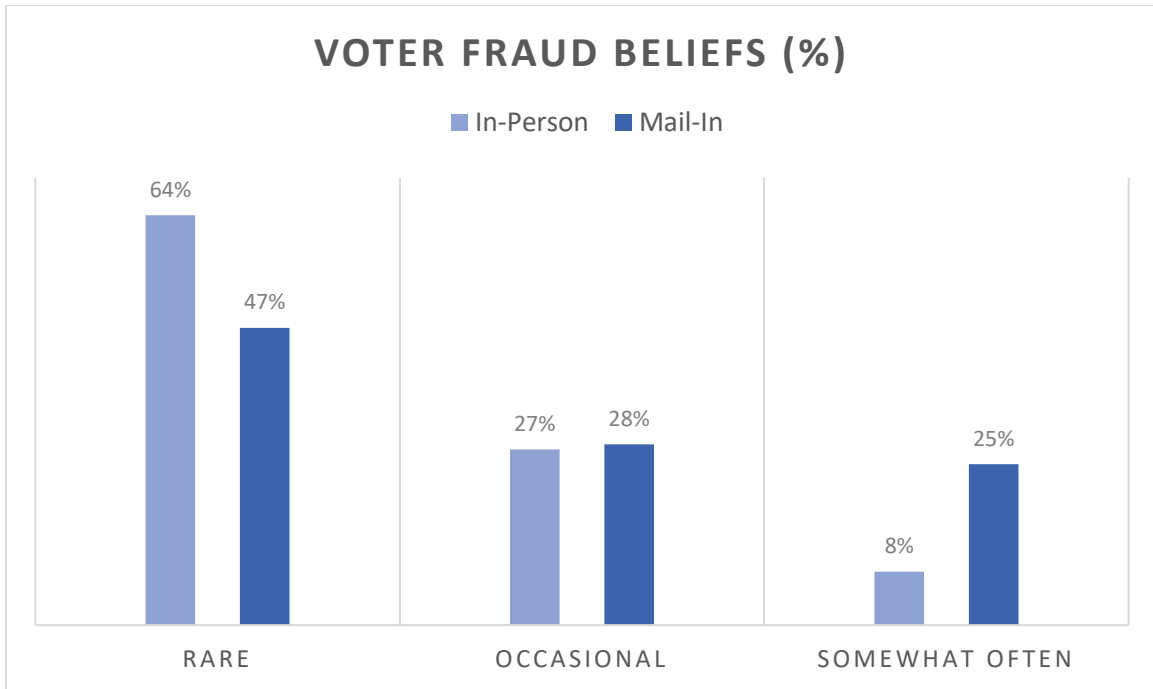
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## 1. Introduction

Can personal experience mitigate the forces of partisanship? Partisan attachments have long been held a significant force in American politics, though with ever greater fervor in the current era of strong partisanship, increasing ideological and affective polarization, and nationalized politics. These powerful and consistent patterns suggest one's personal experience with politics matters little when held up against the bulwark of partisanship. On the other hand, we might expect that direct, personal experience may be more significant in shaping one's views than an abstract sense of partisan attachment. These contradictory expectations lead to larger questions about the complex ways in which American political behavior and public opinion interact. What role does personal experience serve? What happens when one's lived experience conflicts with the driving force of partisan ties? I answer these questions by examining the effect of personal experience voting by mail on one's belief in mail-in voter fraud in Wisconsin following the 2020 presidential election in comparison to partisanship's effect on voter fraud belief.

In the time leading up to the 2020 presidential election and in the wake of the global COVID-19 pandemic, Republican elites' rhetoric and the party's messaging alleging that voting by mail was less secure and legitimate than in-person voting created an intense partisan divide over the issue. Below, Figure 1 shows the differences in voter fraud beliefs between mail-in and in-person voting derived from a survey of Wisconsin residents following the 2020 general election. The disparity in respondents who believed that voter fraud occurs "somewhat often" between mail-in and in-person voting is striking.



**Figure 1.** Percent of beliefs in voter fraud frequency between in-person and mail-in voting. Data Source: April 2021 ERC survey of 2020 WI voters,  $n=2,104$ .

Given the partisan nature of this issue and the widespread, rapid expansion of access to mail ballots in 2020 due in large part to public health concerns over COVID-19, these differences in voter fraud beliefs may be explained by voters’ partisan attachments and their personal experience with voting by mail.

In this paper, I consider the ways in which voters’ direct personal experience voting by mail may shape their views on mail-in voter fraud contrary to partisan messaging, as well as potential policy implications of these findings. I review the literature on mail voting, partisanship, and personal experience, and leverage them to theorize what might happen when experience conflicts with partisan attachment. Given the relative strength of partisanship as a political force in American politics, I predict experience mitigates or reduces the effect of partisanship to some degree. I use the Elections Research Center’s April 2021 survey of Wisconsin voters to test this theory using correlational and instrumental variable analysis and find evidence that voting by mail has a significant effect in reducing mail-in voter fraud beliefs and that this effect is not conditioned

on partisanship. I conclude from these findings that personal experience can mitigate partisanship – voting by mail matters to one’s belief in voter fraud, regardless of partisan affiliation – and that efforts to combat misinformation about voter fraud should consider interventions that increase voters’ experience voting by mail.

The paper proceeds as follows. In Section 2, I review relevant literature on mail voting in the United States and the potentially conflicting effects of partisanship and personal experience. I formulate a theory to explain how these conflicting forces may play out with respect to growing partisan differences in mail-in voter fraud beliefs. In Section 3, I describe the data and methods that I employ to test hypotheses derived from this theory. In Section 4, I present my results, and then discuss their implications in section 5 and note the limitations of this study and areas for improvement. I summarize my conclusions in Section 6.

## **2. Voting by Mail, Partisanship, and Personal Experience**

### ***2.1 Mail Voting in the U.S.***

Voting by mail is a method of casting ballots that has significantly increased in frequency in recent U.S. history, in both the number of ballots cast by mail and the number of states that allow access to this voting method. However, the plurality of voting methods and accompanying election laws that vary by state within the U.S. federalist system of government can create confusion. Mann (2014) categorizes these mail ballot administration systems in four types that vary in the accessibility of mail ballots to voters. In 2020, Wisconsin allowed voters to receive and cast ballots by mail under what Mann would call an Election-Specific Vote-by-Mail system and what has also been referred to as no-excuse absentee ballot voting. Voters could receive these “take home” ballots prior to Election Day and return them later in a number of ways (e.g.: in-person at

their local clerk's office, mail, ballot drop boxes). I simply refer to these ballots as mail ballots, and the act of casting a vote via this method as voting by mail.<sup>3</sup>

Voting by mail has received increasing attention from political scientists in recent decades, with some mixed findings. In one study, Berinsky, Burns, and Traugott (2001) find that the Oregon vote-by-mail system results in a small increase in voter turnout, primarily by reinforcing stratifications in the electorate. They find that resource-rich voters benefit the most from access to mail ballots and argue that as a result, such systems are unlikely to equalize access to the ballot box for eligible voters as policymakers and activists had hoped. Gerber, Huber, and Hill (2013), on the other hand, find that Washington state's move to all-mail voting reduced turnout disparities by increasing turnout among lower-participating registrants rather than frequently-participating registrants. Nonetheless, both studies find increased voter participation as a result of mail voting system implementation. To complicate this further, a 2016 working paper by Meredith and Endter finds that no-excuse absentee voting for 65-year-old voters in Texas does not increase turnout generally, but does increase turnout among those who vote less frequently.

In addition to considering the ways in which voting by mail may affect participation levels generally and inequalities in who votes and how, experts have also studied leaks in the voting pipeline (Stewart 2010) and changes to the voting experience associated with voting by mail (Stewart 2019). At the same time, voting by mail has received increasing partisan attention as well.

## ***2.2 The Partisan Divide***

In the lead-up to the 2020 general election and following the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic, expanding access to mail ballots became a hotly contested policy issue, largely along

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<sup>3</sup> Note, however, that Wisconsinites can also "vote early" by requesting and submitting an absentee ballot all at once, in-person. This paper does not address this complication, as the survey questions asked did not accommodate this possibility.

partisan lines. While election administration changes were made at state and local levels, the issue was national in scope due to the Republican party's efforts to limit voting by mail while the Democratic party worked to expand it. Expanding opportunities for Americans to vote by mail was broadly seen as a way to ensure elections, and particularly the expected high turnout presidential election of November 2020, could safely take place while also limiting the spread of coronavirus by allowing access to the ballot box without requiring voters show up in person. Rapid expansion of mail ballot access did take place in most states, and by September 2020, at least 84% of American voters could cast their ballot by mail in the November election (Rabinowitz and Mayes 2020). Notably, however, five states retained the approved excuse requirement for voters to obtain an absentee ballot: Indiana, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Texas, affecting an estimated 34 million voters.

While supporters and critics of mail voting policies alike pointed out the potential dangers to the election process posed by the possibility of rapidly expanding voting by mail systems across numerous states, some opponents argued that increasing access to mail ballots threatened the security of the election altogether and would result in increased voter fraud. Republican elites argued against voting by mail expansion and made numerous false claims that voter and election fraud would increase if access to mail ballots expanded, warning of potential losses for the Republican party. President Trump, a vehement opponent of voting by mail, asserted that if the U.S. switched to all mail voting, "you'd never have a Republican elected in this country again" (Epstein and Saul 2020). After the 2020 election, President Trump alleged unprecedented (and unfounded) levels of election fraud (Eggers, Garro, and Grimmer 2021). Despite these arguments, numerous studies find statistically insignificant levels of voter fraud generally, as well as any fraud

resulting specifically from mail-in voting (Levitt 2007; Khan and Carson 2012; Brennan Center 2017; Eggers, Garro, and Grimmer 2021).

While the partisan divide over voting by mail intensified considerably and crystallized into its current form in 2020, it has been a partisan issue for decades. In previous years, however, the Republican party seemed to prefer absentee/mail voting and may have been advantaged by it given the demographic and partisan makeup of those who primarily used mail ballots. Despite such perceptions, at least one study has shown that universal voting by mail systems do not privilege one party over another in terms of voter turnout or vote share (Thompson et al. 2020) and the mixed results of prior studies do not support such broad claims.

However, evidence from recent studies suggests voters' preference and use of voting methods have polarized along partisan lines. Gallup polling suggests Democrats heavily favored early voting and voting by mail in 2020 compared to Republicans (Jones 2020). While their first paper emphasizes little difference between Democrats and Republicans in voting method preference early in the pandemic (Kousser et al. 2020), Lockhart et al. (2020) find an emerging substantial partisan divide in preference for voting by mail in their April 2020 online survey, and they report that this gap increased by their second survey in June 2020. Their results on public support for national legislation that would ensure access to absentee ballots also reflect a partisan gap and the authors note there were differential treatment effects by party: reading scientific projections of COVID-19 rates increased Democrats' preference to vote by mail but had no effect on Republicans' preference, though this treatment did seem to increase Republican support for legislation guaranteeing absentee ballot access. Altogether, Lockhart and coauthors' findings suggests a growing partisan divide over how to vote that may have significant consequences on

election outcomes, which groups of Americans vote by mail, and their belief in the legitimacy of those election outcomes.

### ***2.3 The Lens of Partisanship***

Partisanship, or one's attachment to a political party, may be one of the strongest political forces in the U.S., with significant power to predict political behavior and shape attitudes. A growing accumulation of political science research makes a compelling case that social identity and group attachment based on political party affiliation has far-reaching consequences for American politics, particularly in the current era of polarization and increasingly nationalized politics (Achen and Bartels 2016; Iyengar et al. 2012; Hopkins 2018; Abramowitz and Webster 2016). Bafumi and Shapiro (2009), for example, demonstrate the powerful and enduring nature of partisanship today through a significant increase in partisan voting as well as ideological polarization and partisan sorting.

Some studies have attempted to understand how partisanship may serve as a lens that colors how we take in political information. In their study on how voters interpret political information, Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau (1995) portray voter evaluation of campaign information as a process in which they receive information and make a summary affective judgement, and this judgement then informs their preferences and is more memorable in the long run than the actual information from which it was formed. Along a similar vein, Lau and Redlawsk (2001) argue partisanship serves as a commonly used cognitive heuristic to help voters reduce the cognitive load required by voting and other political decision-making.

Perhaps most relevant to the questions at hand is Zaller's (1992) RAS model: Receive-Accept-Sample. In Zaller's conception, individuals do not possess one true political attitude. Instead, he argues, their stated opinions are sampled from many considerations, which form when



they receive information and accept that information when consistent with prior beliefs. Moreover, this sampling of considerations tends to vary based on salience at the time the opinion is elicited. An important element of Zaller's theory is that political elites cue the larger public toward developing certain attitudes by shaping the information they receive and motivating them to form these considerations. Altogether, the extensive literature on partisanship and public opinion illustrates the power of partisan attachment to shape voters' views and behavior.

#### ***2.4 The Role of Personal Experience***

On the other hand, personal experience can also serve as a powerful force to inform political behavior and opinion. Cramer and Toff's (2017) innovative paper highlights the major role of lived experience in the interpretation of political information. They argue that "factual knowledge about politics is consistently interpreted through the lens of personal experiences" (p. 756) and emphasize that this experiential knowledge informs public opinion and behavior and can be developed through conversation. One potential illustration of the power of personal experience is that many studies show that voters tend to prefer and trust voting methods that are widely used in their states – even if they have not experienced that voting method themselves, they may gain experiential knowledge of it through conversation. Alvarez et al. (2011) find that states where expanded vote-by-mail systems have majority support are those that have already implemented these reforms, which suggests such preferences developed from experience, rather than the other way around.

Consequently, we might expect personal experience to have the potential to mitigate or even contradict partisanship as a political force in some cases. Certainly, such experiential knowledge likely reinforces partisanship much of the time. For example, Dinas finds compelling evidence that the act of voting for a political party – making a choice over a set of alternatives –

reinforces partisan attachments by inducing rationalization (2014). Similarly, Sances and Stewart (2015) demonstrate that voters whose preferred candidate lose an election are significantly more likely to believe votes were improperly counted. In these cases, lived experience appears to have reinforced affective partisan ties, rather than countered them. However, it does not seem too much of a stretch to imagine circumstances in which one's personal experience conflicts with one's partisan attachment – what happens then?

### *2.5 A Theory on Conflicting Forces*

Drawing on Zaller's (1992) RAS model and the growing evidence of partisan difference in voter fraud beliefs, I attempt to understand how experience might interact with partisanship to shape attitudes and behavior. On the one hand, when an electoral process becomes a salient political issue due to party messaging and elite rhetoric, as was the case for voting by mail in 2020, voter attitudes toward that electoral process are likely to follow suit and divide along partisan lines as well. Partisanship appears to be the primary force driving Republican voters to believe mail-in voter fraud occurs more often, compared to Democratic and Independent voters. On the other hand, direct experience with an electoral process may also lead voters to better understand and develop confidence in the security of that process, regardless of partisanship.

According to Zaller's RAS model and given the intensity of Republican elite messaging on mail-in voter fraud in 2020, voters affiliated with the Republican party would be expected to take on these voter fraud beliefs more so than those not affiliated with the Republican party. At the same time, however, some Republican voters still opted to vote by mail rather than in-person (227 of the Republican voters surveyed by the Elections Research Center voted by mail in 2020 in Wisconsin – approximately 32% of all Republican voters surveyed). For these Republican voters, it seems that their personal experience voting by mail directly conflicts with their partisanship.

Revisiting the RAS model and drawing on Cramer and Toff's (2017) framework of personal experience, it may be the case that one's lived experience with voting by mail can be included in the political information one receives, which can then serve as the foundation for Zaller's considerations – these might eventually become one's opinion or attitude when sampled. If this is the case, personal experience may mitigate the strength of partisan attachment when they conflict. For example, a Republican who decides to vote by mail might trust such a system more after doing so, in spite of and directly working against the intensity of party messaging that posits such systems increase voter fraud. In sum, when partisanship and personal experience conflict, we may expect to see a reduction in the total outcome of partisan forces.

## ***2.6 Hypotheses on Conflicting Forces***

Formalizing expectations drawn from this theory, I expect that in general, voting by mail decreases one's belief in voter fraud with respect to mail-in voting. Accordingly, I present a general hypothesis:

*H<sub>1</sub>: Mail ballot use causes a decrease in voters' mail-in voter fraud beliefs.*

However, given the strength of partisanship and party elite rhetoric on mail-in voter fraud, I expect Republican voters to believe mail-in voter fraud occurs more often than their Democratic and Independent counterparts. The effect of mail ballot use, though constant for both groups, results in differing voter fraud beliefs due to this partisan difference. Thus, I also expect that:

*H<sub>2</sub>: Mail ballot use results in a smaller total decrease in Republican voters' mail-in voter fraud beliefs than voters who are not affiliated with the Republican party.*

Furthermore, affiliation with the Republican party may even affect the direction and degree of the effect of mail ballot use. Partisanship and party elite rhetoric serve as a powerful lens with which to view one's own experiences. There may be an interaction effect between voting by mail and being affiliated with the Republican party in such a way to recast one's experience voting by

mail that leads these voters to believe mail-in voter fraud occurs more frequently than they would have if they had not voted by mail, or some other effect. In other words, the effect of mail ballot use is conditioned on partisanship. Thus, I also expect that:

*H<sub>3</sub>: Mail ballot use causes no change in Republican voters' mail-in voter fraud beliefs such that there is an interaction effect between Republican partisanship and mail ballot use.*

In the following section, I define and operationalize the key variables in this study. I also offer an identification strategy to test the above hypotheses in both naïve (but informative) and causal frameworks.

### **3. Data and Methods**

To address the questions posed here, I leverage survey data of Wisconsin voters from April 2021 on their experiences in the 2020 general election. Given the variability of state election administration laws, I focus only on the state of Wisconsin for this analysis. The self-administered online survey commissioned by the Elections Research Center (ERC) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison collected responses from a statewide convenience sample of 2,104 Wisconsin residents who were age 18 years or older. Respondents were reached through opt-in third-party online panels. Notably, the sample was restricted to U.S. citizens, consistent with voting eligibility restrictions. Various quality checks were used to ensure respondents were paying attention and responding appropriately. Survey responses were weighted to balance the demographic profile of the sample to target population parameters to ensure a statewide representative sample. Importantly, the central focus on method of voting for this study means that only respondents who report having voted in the 2020 general election are included in the analysis, which excludes 306 survey participants who responded that they did not vote in the 2020 general election.

To test the hypotheses outlined in Section 2.6, I conduct two analyses. First, I examine the correlation between use of mail-in voting and affiliation with the Republican party with belief in mail-in voter fraud and assess whether there is an interaction effect. This analysis is limited in addressing the causal claim because it cannot test for reverse causation. Another plausible scenario contrary to my hypotheses is that voters who believe mail voting is secure are more likely to vote by mail. To determine whether the direction of the causal arrow is correct in  $H_1$ , I employ an instrumental variable strategy and run two-stage least-squares (2SLS) models using public health concern as a proxy for use of mail-in voting. I expect the combination of correlation and instrumental variable analyses to provide sufficient evidence to evaluate my hypotheses.

### ***3.1 Outcome Variable***

The outcome variable of interest in this analysis is belief in mail-in voter fraud. I operationalize this with the following survey question: “How often do you think voter fraud happens with mail-in voting?” [Rarely, Occasionally, Somewhat often]. While I originally planned to create a relative indicator of mail-in voter fraud beliefs to in-person voter fraud beliefs, combining the questions into one indicator using either a subtraction or proportion method complicates interpretation, so I instead use only mail-in fraud as the dependent variable and control for belief in in-person fraud in some models as a robustness check. Thus, this categorical outcome variable of belief in mail-in voter fraud is scaled such that a higher number indicates belief that fraud occurs more often whereas a lower number indicates belief that it occurs less often.

### ***3.2 Explanatory Variables***

The main explanatory variables for this study are partisanship and use of mail-in ballots. I am interested in whether a voter’s experience with voting by mail may affect their beliefs in mail-in voter fraud and whether there is an interaction between this voting by mail effect and party

affiliation. Given the strength of partisanship as a political force in the U.S., it is possible the effect on voter fraud beliefs of mail ballot use may be different for Republicans than for Democrats or Independents. To assess this possibility using the ERC data, I include an interaction variable and operationalize partisanship as a binary variable for Republican affiliation, which includes respondents who identify as Republican and respondents who identify as Independents who lean closer to the Republican party. My voting by mail variable is also binary and is comprised of respondents who report voting in the 2020 general election via an absentee ballot by mail.<sup>4</sup>

### ***3.3 The Instrument***

Correlation between mail ballot use and voter fraud beliefs may reflect causation but in the opposite direction of that proposed in H<sub>1</sub>. To facilitate a test of reverse causation, I use an instrumental variable (IV) strategy and 2SLS analysis that removes voter fraud beliefs from the equation and predicts mail ballot use in the first stage, and then uses those predicted values to explain voter fraud beliefs in the second stage. The instrument I use is concern for public health – specifically, the level of concern respondents reported about the spread of coronavirus at polling places on a 4-point scale.<sup>5</sup> I expect concern for public health to affect both voting by mail behavior and beliefs about mail-in voter fraud independently. For example, voters who are greatly concerned about the potential to catch COVID-19 while voting in-person are likely to use a mail-in ballot instead, but their beliefs in voter fraud are unlikely to change due to their concerns about COVID-19.

This instrument is somewhat weakly correlated with actual mail ballot use (R=0.34), and similarly correlated with Republican affiliation (R=-0.37). While public health concern is an

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<sup>4</sup> The question asked was “How did you cast your ballot?” [In person on election day, In person during early voting, Absentee by mail]

<sup>5</sup> The question asked was “How concerned are you that the coronavirus could be spread at a polling place?” [Very concerned, Somewhat concerned, Not too concerned, Not concerned at all].

imperfect proxy for mail ballot use since there are numerous reasons to choose this voting method, this instrumental strategy enables a causal analysis of the suggestive results derived from the standard OLS regression analysis. An important note in employing this instrumental variable strategy is that it requires amending the language of H<sub>1</sub>, which posits change in the explanatory variable as “variation in mail ballot use,” to “variation in predicted mail ballot use.”

### ***3.4 Control Variables***

I consider four confounding variables in my analysis that could plausibly affect both mail ballot use and mail-in voter fraud beliefs. As previously noted, voter fraud beliefs with respect to in-person voting are particularly relevant to this analysis to account for individual differences in voter fraud beliefs generally. Thus, I control for in-person voter fraud beliefs in some models to determine whether the effect of mail ballot use on mail-in voter fraud beliefs is driven by belief in voter fraud generally.

In addition, I include age, education, and race as control variables. I account for age because older voters are more likely to use mail ballots than younger voters, and they tend to affiliate with the Republican party more as well. Education might also affect mail ballot use and voter fraud beliefs due to correlation between higher educational attainment and income – voting by mail is higher among wealthier voters – as well as correlation with Democratic partisanship. White voters have historically had privileged access to voting in the U.S. compared to non-white voters and thus controlling for racial group in this binary fashion is important to account for this bias.

### ***3.5 Descriptive Statistics***

Descriptive statistics for all variables outlined thus far are presented in Table 1, most of which are binary and/or discrete.

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**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics on key variables and summary values.

	Obs.	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Totals					
						0	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Outcome Variables</b>											
Mail-In Voter Fraud Beliefs	2,104	1.787	–	1	3	–	979	595	530	–	–
<b>Explanatory Variables</b>											
Mail Ballot Use	1,798	0.466	–	0	1	961	837	–	–	–	–
Republican Affiliation	2,104	0.377	–	0	1	1,311	793	–	–	–	–
Public Health Concern	2,104	2.603	–	1	4	–	374	558	702	470	–
<b>Controls</b>											
In-Person Voter Fraud Beliefs	2,104	1.442	–	1	3	–	1,350	578	176	–	–
Age	2,104	54.48	16.488	18	96						
Education	2,104	3.35	–	1	5	–	25	475	664	619	321
White	2,104	0.91	–	0	1	190	1,914	–	–	–	–

*Data Source: April 2021 ERC Wisconsin electorate survey.*

Notably, all of the variables displayed in Table 1 with the exception of Mail Ballot Use are complete for the entire set of study participants – there are no missing data. The Mail Ballot Use variable contains 306 fewer observations than the number of participants surveyed because those respondents reported not voting in the 2020 general election – they are dropped from subsequent regression analysis. Of those who voted, respondents were split relatively evenly between voting in person (either via early voting or on election day) and voting by mail. Taken with the data in Figure 1, these summary statistics reinforce my expectations that the differences between in-person and mail-in voter fraud beliefs may be explained by partisanship and voters’ experience with voting by mail. Also of note, a strong majority of voters in the sample are white, which accurately reflects Wisconsin’s racial makeup but does not represent the U.S. electorate or its population as a whole.

### **3.6 Identification Strategy**



Throughout all models in both the correlation and IV analyses, I aim to identify the impact of mail ballot use or predicted mail ballot use on mail-in voter fraud beliefs. Thus, the estimands of interest, across all models, are the  $\beta$  coefficients from the following general form regression:

$$Y_{mf} = \alpha + \beta_1 * X_m + \beta_2 * X_r + \beta_3 * X_m X_r + \epsilon_p$$

Where  $\beta_1$ ,  $\beta_2$ , and  $\beta_3$  are the estimands of interest,  $Y_{mf}$  is the belief in mail-in voter fraud frequency,  $X_m$  indicates voting by mail,  $X_r$  indicates affiliation with the Republican party, and the interaction effect of  $X_m X_r$  indicates both voting by mail and Republican affiliation. In the naïve OLS analyses,  $X_m$  represents mail ballot use, or in other words, voting by mail in the 2020 general election. In the IV analysis, I run 2SLS models to assess the causal impact of mail ballot use where  $X_m$  represents mail ballot use, as predicted by the public health concern instrument in the first stage regression.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 OLS Analysis

To assess my hypotheses, I first examine the OLS regression models. As previously noted, survey participants who did not vote in the 2020 general election are excluded from analysis. I use three models to examine the effect of voting by mail, or mail ballot use, on belief in mail-in voter fraud. The first model is the simplest and follows the general regression form exactly as outlined in the previous section. The second model includes in-person voter fraud beliefs as a control variable to account for individual differences among respondents' voter fraud beliefs more generally. The third model controls for this as well as age, education, and white racial identity. The results of the correlation models are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** The Effect of Mail Ballot Use on Mail-In Voter Fraud Beliefs using OLS

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Mail Ballot Use	-0.377 (0.039)***	-0.25 (0.034)***	<b>-0.246 (0.034)***</b>
Republican	0.862 (0.041)***	0.698 (0.036)***	<b>0.702 (0.036)***</b>
Mail*Republican	0.055 (0.065)	-0.063 (0.055)	-0.067 (0.055)
In-Person Fraud	–	0.592 (0.022)***	0.589 (0.023)***
Age	–	–	-0.000 (0.000)
Education	–	–	-0.025 (0.013)
White	–	–	-0.057 (0.051)
Intercept	1.575 (0.029)***	0.772 (0.039)***	0.916 (0.087)***
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.380	0.554	0.555
Observations	1,798	1,798	1,798

*Note: \*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01, \*\*\*p<0.001*

The results across all three models demonstrate a consistent pattern: voting by mail appears to have a statistically significant effect on mail-in voter fraud beliefs in the expected direction. In other words, the effect of voting by mail is a significant decrease in both magnitude ( $\beta_1 = -0.25$ ) and statistical significance ( $p=0.00$ ) on belief in frequency of mail-in voter fraud, which supports H<sub>1</sub>. In addition, Republican affiliation is also strongly significant ( $p=0.00$ ) and increases belief in frequency of mail-in voter fraud ( $\beta_2 = 0.7$ ). Taken together, these main effect results confirm H<sub>2</sub> because the average Republican voter’s belief in mail-in voter fraud will be greater than the average Democratic or Independent voter, even if both archetypes vote by mail. As expected, in-person voter fraud beliefs are statistically significant and have a positive effect on mail-in voter fraud beliefs, which is to say that those who believe voter fraud occurs more often in-person are also likely to believe it occurs by mail as well.

The results of the interaction between voting by mail and Republican affiliation are also revealing. The interaction effect is not statistically significant across all three models and the coefficient appears to straddle zero, which increases my confidence that there is no meaningful

interaction between voting by mail and Republican affiliation. This null finding for  $H_3$  suggests the effect of mail ballot use is not conditioned on Republican affiliation; or in other words, the effect of voting by mail is constant regardless of partisanship.

Altogether, these findings from simple correlation analysis indicate strong correlation between partisanship and voting by mail, but do not provide evidence of an interaction between the two. The results of the simplest model remain robust as control variables are added and the models' fit to the data increases, though even the first model is a relatively good fit ( $R^2=0.38$ ). Notably, age shows no effect or statistical significance whatsoever and education is close to statistical significance ( $p=0.056$ ). It is also interesting that the intercept coefficient is quite large (and statistically significant) – this may indicate that those who voted in person were more likely to believe in higher frequencies of mail-in voter fraud than those who voted by mail, regardless of partisanship.

#### ***4.2 IV Analysis***

Despite a strong, cohesive pattern across these models, the OLS analysis cannot substantiate a causal claim. To evaluate my hypotheses within a causal framework, I turn to IV analysis. Once again, I use three models that range in complexity to examine the effect of voting by mail on belief in mail-in voter fraud. However, in this 2SLS regression analysis, I use concern for public health as the instrument to predict mail ballot use in the first stage, and then use these predicted values to determine the effect on mail-in voter fraud beliefs in the second stage. Doing so allows for a test of reverse causation, since public health concerns are not related to mail-in voter fraud beliefs. The results of the IV analysis are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3.** The Effect of Mail Ballot Use on Mail-In Voter Fraud Beliefs using 2SLS

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Mail Ballot Use	-0.719 (0.196)***	-0.569 (0.18)**	<b>-0.511 (0.173)**</b>
Republican	1.202 (0.135)***	1.054 (0.118)***	<b>1.074 (0.117)***</b>
Mail*Republican	-1.262 (0.289)***	-1.365 (0.262)***	<b>-1.418 (0.259)***</b>
In-Person Fraud	–	0.555 (0.034)***	0.567 (0.033)***
Age	–	–	0.002 (0.001)*
Education	–	–	-0.023 (0.017)
White	–	–	-0.064 (0.069)
Intercept	1.767 (0.112)***	0.996 (0.129)***	0.955 (0.139)***
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	-0.000	0.193	0.204
Observations	1,798	1,798	1,798

*Note: \*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01, \*\*\*p<0.001*

The results of this IV analysis across all three models largely support the results of the OLS analysis. Voting by mail and Republican affiliation are both statistically significant with similar coefficients to that of the OLS analysis. Mail ballot use has a negative effect on mail-in voter fraud beliefs ( $\beta_1 = -0.51$ ) that is statistically significant ( $p=0.003$ ), which supports H<sub>1</sub>. Republican affiliation has a statistically significant ( $p=0.000$ ) positive effect on these beliefs ( $\beta_2 = 1.07$ ). Taken with the first main effect, this finding supports H<sub>2</sub> – the effect of voting by mail does not cancel out the effect of partisanship on voters’ beliefs in mail-in voter fraud, though it does mitigate it. Thus, in general, Republican voters who vote by mail still believe in a greater frequency of mail-in voter fraud than Democratic or Independent voters who vote by mail, as a result of the partisan difference in voter fraud beliefs.

Interestingly, I find a statistically significant interaction between these variables in the IV analysis, which would suggest that the effect of voting by mail is conditioned on partisanship such that the effect of voting by mail for Republican voters is greater in magnitude than for Democratic or Independent voters. However, given the non-significance of this interaction in the prior analysis,

these mixed results may simply be the result of a weak or non-perfectly correlated instrument in concern for public health as proxy for voting by mail. In-person voter fraud is once again significant, as expected, and the intercept across all three models in the IV analysis are similar to that of the OLS analysis. The adjusted R-squared in these models are concerningly low ( $R^2=0.2$ ), which also suggests the instrument is a poor proxy for voting by mail. Nevertheless, these findings provide evidence of a significant causal effect of mail ballot use on mail-in voter fraud beliefs. In other words, voting by mail causes a decrease in mail-in voter fraud frequency beliefs. Partisanship is also found to have a significant causal effect on mail-in voter fraud beliefs, such that Republican affiliation causes an increase these beliefs.

## **5. Discussion**

The theory and hypotheses presented in Section 2 of this paper were largely supported by the quantitative analysis, if cautiously. The results of this limited analysis suggest that voting by mail reduces mail-in voter fraud beliefs. Moreover, this effect appears not to be conditioned on partisanship: voting by mail reduces belief in voter fraud to the same degree among both Republican voters and their Democratic and Independent counterparts. This finding is somewhat surprising, as it suggests the direct experience with this mode of voting may entirely negate the effect of partisanship on voter fraud beliefs – rather than merely mitigating partisan forces.

These results suggest meaningful policy implications. These findings demonstrate that a voter's experience with voting by mail matters, regardless of partisanship. My findings show voting by mail mitigates the effect of partisanship on voter fraud beliefs, which suggests that when it comes to countering partisan distrust with respect to mail-in voting, those who can be convinced to use it or otherwise gain experience with it are also likely to gain more confidence in the voting

system than they would otherwise. Thus, policymakers and election administrators might consider interventions that rely on increasing voters' experience with voting by mail in order to combat misinformation about voter fraud and increase confidence in the security of the election system.

The analysis in this paper does not shed light on the mechanism by which this mail-in voting effect occurs, however. Drawing on cognitive dissonance theory, it may be that voters who decide to vote by mail gain more confidence in the security of mail-in voting by rationalizing that it must be secure in order to justify their choice, whereas those who decide not to vote by mail preserve their doubts about its security. Future research might leverage an additional question from the ERC survey that asks how respondents plan to vote in future elections in order to determine whether such a mechanism is at work. Additionally, using more complex measures of party identification and educational attainment would allow for a more direct test of Zaller's RAS model as a theoretical explanation.

This analysis is limited in a number of other ways. Concern for public health seems to be a weak instrument for voting by mail, and it's possible that partisan differences with respect to concerns about COVID-19 interfere with the use of this variable as an instrument. Additionally, certain specifications decisions may be more appropriate to capture the concepts I attempt to measure here. For example, it may be worth creating a relative indicator of voter fraud beliefs rather than simply controlling for in-person voter fraud beliefs. Moreover, my analysis is limited to only one outcome variable and one measure of experience with voting by mail – additional measures from the ERC survey should be explored.

Additional analysis might also compare results between voters who identify as Republican to those who admit leaning towards the Republican party – given the importance of political awareness associated with partisanship in Zaller's RAS model, we may find significant differences

between the two groups. Another unanswered question is the electoral consequence that the effects demonstrated in this analysis bring to bear on the 2020 election, and which may occur in future elections. Also, I am not able to validate survey participants' self-report of voting with public voting records for this paper but doing so may increase confidence in my data. More broadly, this study only utilizes survey data of Wisconsin voters, a sample that is not representative of the U.S. electorate. Future research could expand the sample beyond the state of Wisconsin to learn the extent to which the results of this analysis are more broadly generalizable. The 2020 SPAE and 2020 CES are particularly relevant data sources that might be useful to address these limitations.

## **6. Conclusion**

In this paper, I consider relevant literature on the political forces of partisanship and voter experience to theorize how voting by mail may mitigate partisanship and decrease mail-in voter fraud beliefs. I outline my hypotheses and test them with OLS and IV analysis using survey data on Wisconsin voters. My findings support my theory and first two hypotheses: the results show that voting by mail decreases mail-in voter fraud beliefs and that this effect is not conditioned on partisanship. I suggest a potential mechanism by which the mail ballot use effect may occur as an area for future research. These results are significant for political science in advancing our understanding of the relationship between personal experience and partisanship: this evidence suggests voters' experiences can moderate the forces of partisanship when they conflict. While it does not mean that partisanship is negated entirely, this study helps to calibrate the extent to which partisanship rules our political lives.

Furthermore, these results bear normative and policy-related significance. For policymakers, election administrators, and others interested in combatting voter fraud

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misinformation, these findings suggest interventions that expand voters' mail ballot use may effectively decrease voter fraud beliefs, regardless of voters' partisanship. This may be particularly relevant as voting by mail becomes increasingly more common in the U.S., while at the same time, misinformation and partisan differences in voter fraud beliefs have also rapidly taken hold and do not appear to be going away any time soon.



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