

Are Voters Polarized Along Party Lines About How to Run Elections During the COVID-19 Crisis?

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Abstract

Are voters as polarized as political leaders when it comes to their preferences about how to cast their ballots in November 2020 and their policy positions on how elections should be run in light of the COVID-19 outbreak? Prior research has shown little party divide on voting by mail, with nearly equal percentages of voters in both parties choosing to vote this way where it is an option. Has a divide opened up this year in how voters aligned with the Democratic and Republican parties prefer to cast a ballot?

We address these questions with two nationally diverse, online surveys fielded from April 8-10 and June 11-13, of 5,612 and 5,818 eligible voters respectively, with an embedded experiment providing treated respondents with scientific projections about the COVID-19 outbreak. We find a nearly ten-percentage point difference between Democrats and Republicans in their preference for voting by mail in April which has doubled in size to nearly twenty-percentage points during the pandemic. We also find that support for national legislation requiring states to offer no-excuse absentee ballots has emerged as an increasingly polarized issue.

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Introduction

Facing the threat of the COVID-19 crisis, elected officials from the major parties have offered sharply divergent prescriptions about how to run November's election. Democratic Senators Klobuchar and Wyden have introduced legislation to expand access to voting through the mail and some states have proposed to run their primaries entirely through the mail (1). Republican leaders have spoken against the mandatory mail ballot approach (2); President Trump has tweeted that "Republicans should fight very hard when it comes to state-wide mail-in voting. Democrats are clamoring for it. Tremendous potential for voter fraud, and for whatever reason, doesn't work out well for Republicans." (3)

Among voters, prior research has shown little party divide on voting by mail, with nearly equal percentages of voters in both parties choosing to vote this way in past studies (4, 5). Has a divide emerged this year in how voters aligned with the Democratic and Republican parties want to cast a ballot? What determines public opinions about confidence in the integrity of elections results and policies moving toward voting by mail?

To provide data that informs these conversations, we report how two samples of the nation's eligible voters want to see November's election run. We present the results of two online surveys fielded on April 8-10 and then June 11-13 asking a nationally diverse sample of 5,612 and 5,818 eligible American voters for their views on how they would like to vote – in person or through mail ballots? -- in November and their preferences about proposed changes in election policies. We embed a randomized experiment in these surveys presenting respondents with truthful summaries of the projections of two teams of scientists about the COVID-19 outbreak (6, 7): one predicting a peak in the spring and the other in the fall.

We pre-registered four hypotheses. First, we predicted that, in the control condition, there will be partisan divides on support for national legislation expanding vote-by-mail options (H1) as well as confidence in election integrity when elections are held by mail (H2). In line with previous research, we expected no partisan gap in personal preference over how to cast a ballot (H3). Because recent work has shown that Republicans are less concerned with COVID-19 and less trusting of scientific efforts, the impact of expert COVID-19 projections in the treatment conditions should be attenuated for Republicans (H4). Our results find support for the first two hypotheses, partial support for the fourth hypothesis, but evidence, against H3, that a partisan divide is now emerging over how to cast ballots. In the follow-up survey, we also show the policy preference and desire to vote by mail gaps have grown significantly during the course of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Results

Results from four models testing for partisan differences are displayed in Figure 1. These results are from weighted OLS regressions where respondents from the nationally diverse samples are weighted to match the sample frame of the national citizen, voting age population and the p-values are from one-tailed hypothesis tests based on the pre-registered hypotheses. Treatment conditions are pooled; all treated respondents read one of the scientific projections about COVID-19. Partisan differences within the control group are reported below.

Column (1) shows support for national legislation requiring states to implement no-excuse absentee ballots for all voters who request them, among those offering an opinion. Support is relatively high; in April 87.3% of Democrats supported the policy and 64.1% of

Republicans supported it. The coefficient representing time shows a small drop in support for no-excuse absentee ballots for Democrats (2.3%) but a much larger decline for Republicans (12.6%), suggesting an increasing divide between partisans on the issue.

Column (2) shows the support for national legislation requiring vote-by-mail for the November election among those offering an opinion. The constant indicates that, without being presented with COVID-19 projections, 69.4% of Democrats supported such a policy. This is substantively and statistically significantly higher than Republicans; only 44.9% of Republicans offering an opinion supported national legislation requiring vote-by-mail in April. In June, support among Democrats for mandatory vote-by-mail had dropped 4.7%; among Republicans the drop was almost twice as large at 10.0%.

The patterns in Columns (3) and (4) are similar; Democrats were significantly more likely than Republicans to want to cast their own ballot by mail and significantly more likely to believe that voting by mail is the best way to ensure the integrity of the election. In April, 40.1% of Democrats indicated that they would like to vote by mail in November while 30.5% of Republicans wanted to vote by mail. In June this gap grew as 44.8% of Democrats and only 25.5% of Republicans indicated they would like to vote by mail at this point. When respondents were asked what type of voting methods gives them the greatest confidence in the integrity of the election 30.1% of Democrats chose vote-by-mail as the best method of voting while only 18.2% of Republicans chose it in April. This gap did not change over time, despite polarization on other vote-by-mail policy and personal preferences.

Turning to the experiment, the treatment moved Democratic respondents towards favoring personally voting by mail in the November election and increased their confidence in vote-by-mail. Reading scientific projections of when COVID-19 cases are likely to peak increased Democrats' preference to vote by mail by 7.5 percentage points. Republicans showed a different pattern as the treatment effect on the respondent's preferred method to cast a ballot was significantly lower (and indistinguishable from 0). For policy preferences, Democrats were largely unmoved by the treatment while Republicans were moved only on their support for no-excuse absentee ballots.

Figure 2 provides predicted probability plots showing the likelihood of supporting no-excuse absentee ballot legislation and choosing vote-by-mail as one's preferred method of voting across conditions and partisanship. This figure highlights that scientific projections related to COVID-19 widened the partisan divide in vote-by-mail preferences and also that there was growing polarization on vote-by-mail policies between April and June.

Discussion

These results shed light on how COVID-19, as well as statements by today's political leaders, might alter previous findings related to vote-by-mail preferences. While previous work showed no partisan gap related to voting by mail in American elections (4), our results suggest that COVID-19 has the potential to create one.

Confirming our hypothesis, we found significant partisan differences in support for no-excuse absentee ballot legislation; a strong majority of Democrats support such a proposal while Republicans are more split, although a majority also support it. Similarly, Republicans are less likely to believe that vote-by-mail is the best way to ensure the integrity of the November election. Unlike our expectations, we also found a significant difference in partisan preference

to personally vote by mail; nearly a third of Republicans do prefer this option for November's election, but Democrats (as well as independents) are significantly more likely to want to cast their ballot without visiting a polling place.

We also found that personal preferences to vote by mail and support for national legislation expanding voting-by-mail have become increasingly polarized since April.

The experimental results suggest that exposure to information about the peak of the COVID-19 outbreak exacerbates some of these gaps, with Democrats becoming significantly more likely to want to cast their ballot by mail while the same information did not move Republican preferences. This finding matches existing research on the partisan divide in trust in experts (8); Republicans are less willing to trust expert advice than Democrats. If the COVID-19 outbreak persists, this might contribute to a widening divide in partisan preferences on how to cast a ballot. Whether the expressed preferences for a voting method result in actual partisan differences in voting behavior will be revealed in November, 2020.

Materials and Methods

The surveys were fielded from April 8-10 and June 11-13, 2020 using Luc.Id's Fulcrum platform. This platform has previously been demonstrated to provide nationally diverse samples that exhibit similar treatment effects to samples from other sources (9). The sample frame was American citizens of voting age. The total sample included 5,612 and 5,818 respondents respectively. Partisanship was measured using a 7-point scale that ranges from "Strongly Democrat" to "Strongly Republican" and both those who identified with one of the two major parties or indicated they leaned towards one were included as partisans. The treatments were:

- While no one can be certain how the COVID-19 outbreak will progress in the United States, one well-respected team of scientists at a leading university has projected that if social distancing measures are widely adopted [, the effects of the virus [will reach/will have reached] their peak in April, then gradually decline throughout the spring and into the summer./ now but are lifted during the early fall, a new surge in cases will come and the effects of the virus will reach their peak in November or December.]

This study was reviewed by the institutional review board at UC San Diego and deemed exempt as it met the criteria for minimal risk and participants were debriefed at the end. Informed consent was collected before respondents answered any questions. The method and hypotheses were pre-registered at EGAP.org, ID 20200414AB.

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Figures (for initial submission)

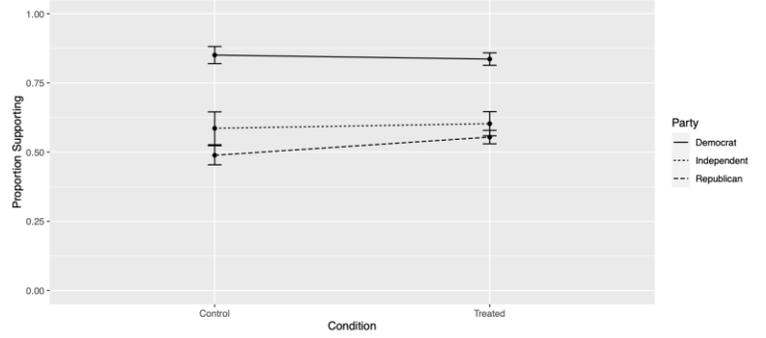
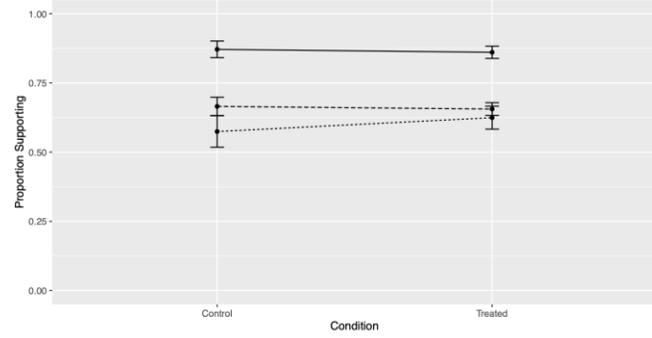
	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Support for no-excuse absentee ballots	Support for mandatory mail ballot voting	Personal preference is to vote by mail	Mail ballots provide most confidence in integrity of results
	(1)	(2)	(3)	
Treatment	-0.013 (0.014)	0.023 (0.016)	0.075** (0.014)	0.027* (0.013)
Independent	-0.287** (0.027)	-0.277** (0.031)	-0.008 (0.026)	0.048* (0.024)
Republican	-0.232** (0.019)	-0.245** (0.022)	-0.096** (0.020)	-0.119** (0.018)
Treatment X Independent	0.046 (0.029)	0.018 (0.033)	0.007 (0.028)	-0.039 (0.026)
Treatment X Republican	0.040* (0.020)	-0.003 (0.023)	-0.057** (0.021)	-0.004 (0.019)
Wave	-0.023* (0.013)	-0.047** (0.015)	0.047** (0.014)	0.017 (0.012)
Wave X Independent	0.013 (0.028)	0.018 (0.032)	-0.041 (0.027)	-0.046* (0.024)
Wave X Republican	-0.103** (0.019)	-0.053** (0.022)	-0.097** (0.020)	-0.026 (0.018)
Constant	0.873** (0.013)	0.694** (0.015)	0.401** (0.013)	0.301** (0.012)
Observations	9,393	8,913	11,223	11,223
R ²	0.088	0.078	0.036	0.023
Adjusted R ²	0.088	0.077	0.036	0.022

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01
P-values based on one-tailed tests

Figure 1. Results from weighted OLS regressions of support for no-excuse absentee balloting, mandatory vote-by-mail legislation and vote-by-mail balloting on treatment, partisanship, and their interaction.

For the upcoming November 3 election, would you support national legislation directing all states to send a vote by mail ballot to any voter who requests one?

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In the upcoming November 3 election, if you had the ability to cast a ballot in any way you wished, what would be your most preferred way to cast a ballot?

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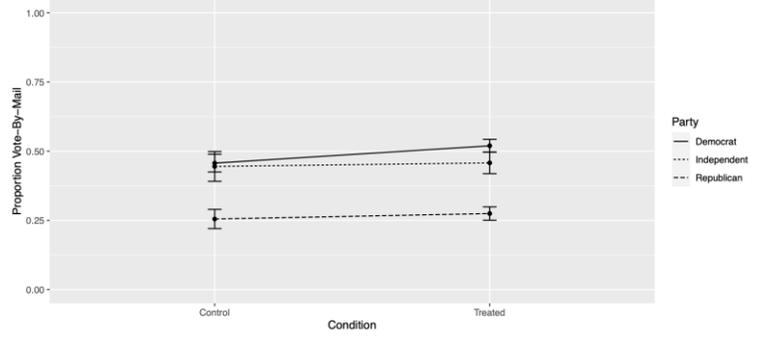
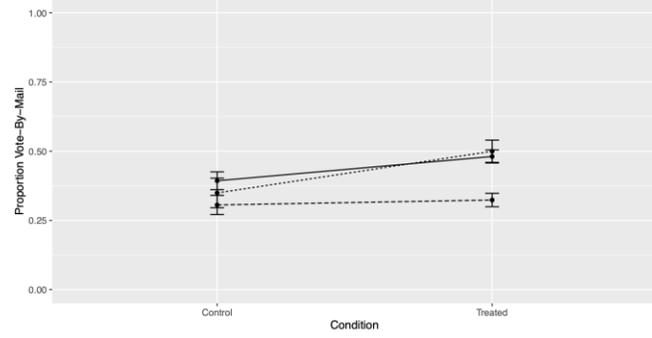


Figure 2. Predicted probabilities for supporting vote-by-mail or preferring to vote by mail by party and treatment condition in April (left) and June (right).