

# Changes in Attitudes: Nothing Remains Quite the Same with Opinions on Absentee Voting

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**Note:** This paper is a working draft and analysis from the first survey of a two survey project. The second survey of Texas voters will begin to be fielded on June 29, 2020 prior to the election on July 2020.

Absentee ballots preserve the ability of voters to participate in elections in the even they are unable to vote in person. Texas has used absentee voting for over 95 years, however the law requires an excuse must be given for why an accommodation is necessary. Using a survey experiment from a statewide survey, I breakdown how the threat of contracting a disease is likely to alter voter behavior. The results show that population density and recognition of a public health threat provide additional marginal effects beyond difference of opinion by party. When all voters face a public health crisis, like the coronavirus pandemic, voters are more likely to consider voter convenience in their interest for fair and legitimate elections.

## Introduction

Texas offers multiple perspectives to assess whether a pandemic creates enough of an exogenous shock to change public opinion or public policy about election reforms. Principally, Texas is not a state that has historically favored the use of absentee voting. In fact, vote by mail rates are lower than the national average in 98% of Texas's counties.<sup>1</sup> State leaders, in 2020, view absentee voting as a liability for election integrity and have not been considering opportunities to adopt excuse absentee voting in the state.<sup>2</sup> However, the timing of the coronavirus pandemic during an election has elevated public concern

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<sup>1</sup> The Election Administration and Voting data reports that 4 counties in Texas have vote by mail rates higher than 24% and ten counties did not report their data.

<sup>2</sup> Lt. Governor Dan Patrick stated on Fox News that Mail-in voting is a "scam by Democrats to steal votes." Also, there is no reason someone under 65 should cite the pandemic as a reason to say "I am afraid to go vote."

about visiting public places (i.e. polling locations). Additionally, Governor Greg Abbott stated [in direct reference to vote by mail] “everything is on the table”<sup>3</sup> to hold the state’s elections.

Texas’s election law provides two provisions where a voter can qualify to vote absentee that match public health recommendations. Voters over the age of 65 can already request an absentee ballot in any election, despite the increased health risk they face by the coronavirus. Also, if voting will cause additional harm to a voter who is injured or sick, the state’s election laws would allow a health professional to advise the injured person to vote by mail.

With respect to elections, Texas responded to the threat of the coronavirus in three ways. First, Governor Greg Abbott moved the date of the May primary run-off elections to July, as well as all municipal elections [scheduled in May] to be moved to the November ballot.<sup>4</sup> Later, Governor Greg Abbott issued a proclamation to extend early voting by one week ahead of the run-off elections for the party primary to allow voters more flexibility to cast their ballots during the pandemic.<sup>5</sup> The additional responsiveness of the Governor to allow more flexibility with the expectation of balancing social distancing and access for voters occurred after some Texas counties sued the state following the Attorney General’s opinion that county election officials could not accept absentee voter applications from a healthy individual under the age of 65 who was primarily concerned about contracting the virus.

The conflict between election administrators that wanted to use vote by mail as a solution to provide greater access to voters ahead of the primary run-off elections and the state’s position that the threat of the coronavirus was not an adequate excuse motivated the questions of this paper. How much will the threat of the coronavirus affect turnout in the, now delayed, primary run-off? Has the

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<sup>3</sup> In mid-March, when asked at a press conference if the Governor would consider expanding vote by mail, he replied “Everything is on the table” (Wallace 2020).

<sup>4</sup> This is a link to the full proclamation: <https://gov.texas.gov/news/post/governor-abbott-issues-proclamation-regarding-july-4th-early-voting-for-special-runoff-elections>

<sup>5</sup> Governor Abbott also made the statement that if the coronavirus was a threat in the November elections, the same decision would be made to allow an extra week of early voting.

coronavirus pandemic created enough uncertainty to change voter preferences about vote by mail in Texas?

A statewide survey of Texas voters shows that voters are willing to support anyone to cast an absentee ballot. However, there is greater skepticism within the public's attitudes if you ask for more details. As expected from elite partisan rhetoric, voters that identify as Republicans oppose access through absentee voting, citing concern for voter fraud. However, most voters would support a short-term provision to allow no-excuse absentee voting during the pandemic. Twenty-eight percent of Republicans (or lean Republican) in Texas support a short-term expansion of vote by mail for this year or anytime there is a health emergency. This differs from the national discussion, because while Texas voters are prioritizing the health of others, they are not willing to completely change the state's election laws during a health crisis.

Choosing to focus on one state to examining the differences in public opinion about the potential use of an existing voting method matters for a number of reasons. Surveying the state will improve estimates of how voter turnout during early voting and on Election Day may differ (Keele and Minozzi 2013). The ability for counties in Texas to adapt and expand vote by mail during a pandemic is dependent on an interpretation of state law and not federal law. The election administrators have to decide, who should be protected from injury by voting and does the state's equal protection clause apply in this case (as it does with modifications available to voters that cannot provide photo identification). Moreover, infection rates across states show that variations exist locally and states are more comparable based on their experiences rather than their geography. Most importantly, for the contribution of this study is that what occurs in in July 2020 during the party primary elections is likely inform what the state does in November 2020.

## Absentee Voting in the U.S. & Texas

Voting by mail is the ballot alternative many see as a solution to avoid public contact during a pandemic, because the risk of infection and the spread of the virus is a matter of public health and safety. Those who oppose an expansion of vote by mail present two arguments that need to be considered.

Individuals over the age of 65 are at the greatest risk of a respiratory infection from the coronavirus and may already vote absentee under the current law. Opposition to absentee voting elicits a clear partisan division, because of elite cues that remind voters of past evidence of voter fraud via absentee ballots (Mann, Gronke, and Adana 2020). Due to the conflicting beliefs regarding the use of absentee ballots and the integrity of the election, it is important to review the state's history of vote by mail and why it is different than others across the nation.

Absentee voting, or vote-by-mail, has served as an alternative to voting on Election Day in the state of Texas since 1925. Like other states at the time, Texas law requires voters to offer an excuse for why an accommodation is necessary and at times offer documentation. Although, Texas was an early adopter of this election reform, over the past 50 years, 34 states and the District of Columbia have changed their election laws to provide any registered voter the convenience of voting absentee at their request. The continued promotion of absentee voting that occurred across the country, did not occur in Texas.

The state's skepticism with any expansion of absentee voting is rooted in a distrust of how campaigns will manipulate a voting system that provides inconsistent oversight. In the past 35 years the negative frame used to discuss absentee voting has cited a history of campaigns harvesting absentee ballots in cities. One salient example, as the Texas legislature's 1989 investigation into a school board election for the Dallas Independent School District. Accusations were made that individuals associated with a campaign delivered and collected absentee ballots from voters in an effort to direct votes under

the guise of saving voters postage.<sup>6</sup> Eight years later, in 1997, the Texas legislature passed legislation to increase the legal penalty of manipulating absentee ballots by elevating mail fraud related to elections from a Class B misdemeanor to a Class A misdemeanor.<sup>7</sup> Both examples point to Texas's willingness to revise absentee voting, but there has been apprehensive to expand access to absentee voting. Theoretically, this decreases the leverage of a national trend shaping policy within the state.

Under normal conditions, absentee voting made up one quarter of all ballots cast across the country in the 2014, 2016, and 2018 elections (EAVS 2018). The steady rate of vote by mail participation nationally is interesting,<sup>8</sup> because the percentage of votes cast early in-person has increased 7% and the percent of voters participating on Election Day have decreased. Although, these methods of voting are not used equally, national polls suggest a majority of voters support allowing other voters to use absentee voting if they prefer to (Younis 2020).

Historically, the most frequent use of absentee voting in Texas occurs in the more populated counties. In the 2016, primary election run-off 40% of the ballots cast in Harris County before Election Day were by mail. Figure 1, shows that percentage is an outlier compared to the percentage of absentee ballots used in presidential primaries in the Texas's 15 most populated counties. However, the large demand for vote by mail in the most recent party primary run-off cannot be ignored when planning for what the demand could be during the pandemic.

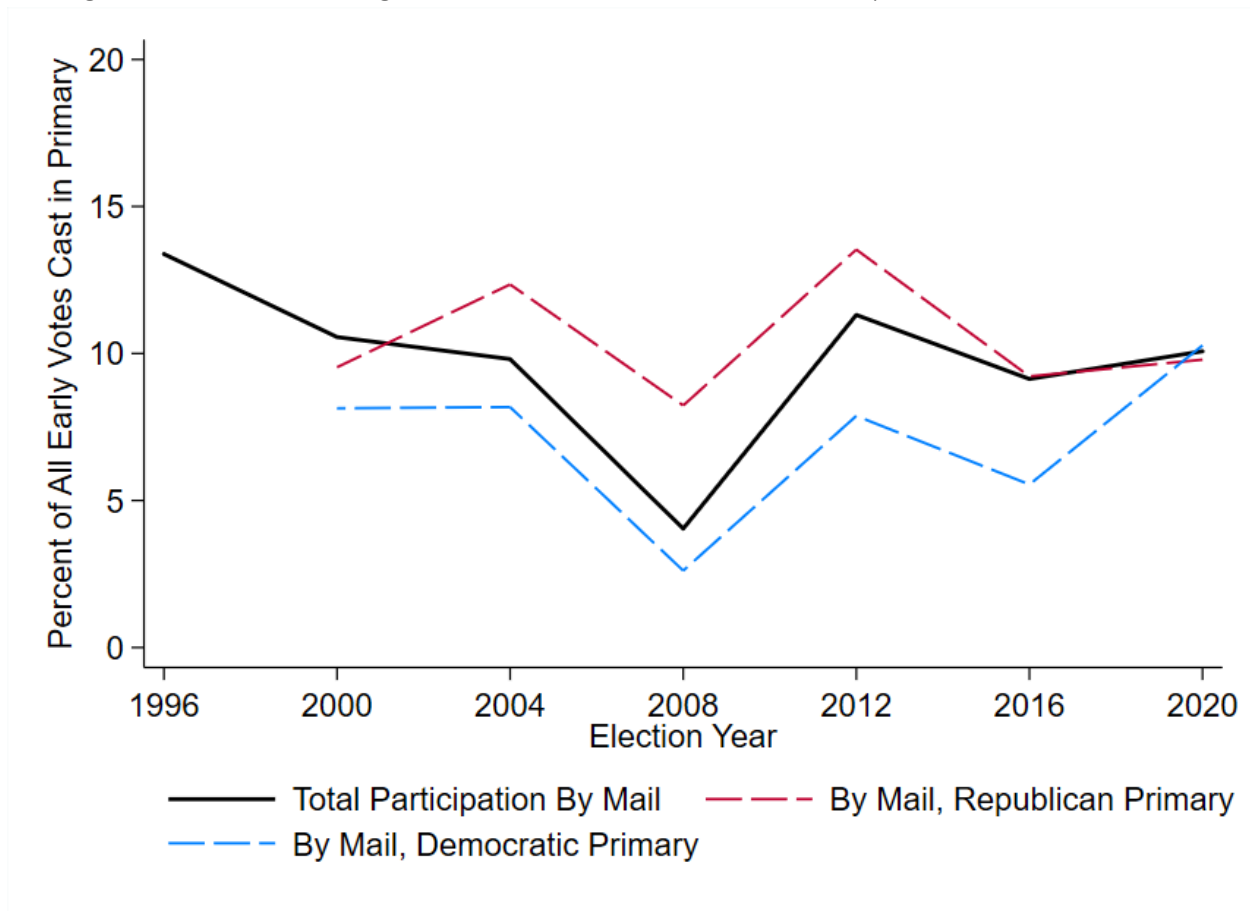
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<sup>6</sup> It was not until 2001 that Dallas County moved to cover the postage of all absentee ballots.

<sup>7</sup> Recently, the Texas legislature clarified an ambiguity in the law regarding how to handle voter requests for absentee ballots before the date set by the law. In 2019, the Texas legislature passed a new law, directly counties to honor absentee ballot requests received before the 37 day period counties provide official ballot requests. The law also specifies, absentee ballots for those early requests are to be mailed to the voter 30 days prior to the election.

<sup>8</sup> Oregon, Washington, Colorado, and Utah offer universal vote-by mail. Also, California allows voters to opt-in to always receive an absentee ballot.

Figure 1: Absentee Voting in Presidential Primaries, 15 Most Populated Counties in Texas



The descriptive trends in Figure 1 show the use of absentee voting in Texas's primary elections, as well as within the specific primaries as a function of how many votes were cast by mail compared to all votes cast before Election Day. The use of vote by mail has not varied substantially in the past 24 years and absentee voting continues to be infrequently used by Republican and Democratic voters. Although, from election to election there is significant variation in who uses absentee voting in Texas, so we should not think of a voter as a permanent absentee voter (Meredith and Endter 2016). Another issue with this measure is that the denominator varies based on how many votes are cast before Election Day. We know that participation of in-person early voting is increasing, which explains in part why the use of absentee ballots appears to be lower in 2008 even though the total volume of absentee ballots has increased every year. The population growth Texas has experienced in the last 20 years

necessitates the importance of looking at absentee ballots this way to make clearer comparisons across time.

Another way to conceptualize partisan differences in the use of vote by mail is to compare the use of the voting method by party. This comparison avoids any potential bias in measurement based on the expectation that Democratic voters are more likely to vote early (Stewart and Foley 2020; or see Thompson 2020). However, we should expect Republicans to make up a larger share of the votes if the state has more Republican voters. Additionally, the higher levels of vote by mail participation among Republicans is consistent with an electorate where more voters in Texas over the age of 65 identify as Republicans and are always able to vote absentee.

Figure 2: Share of all Absentee Votes Cast in the Democratic Primaries, Presidential Years

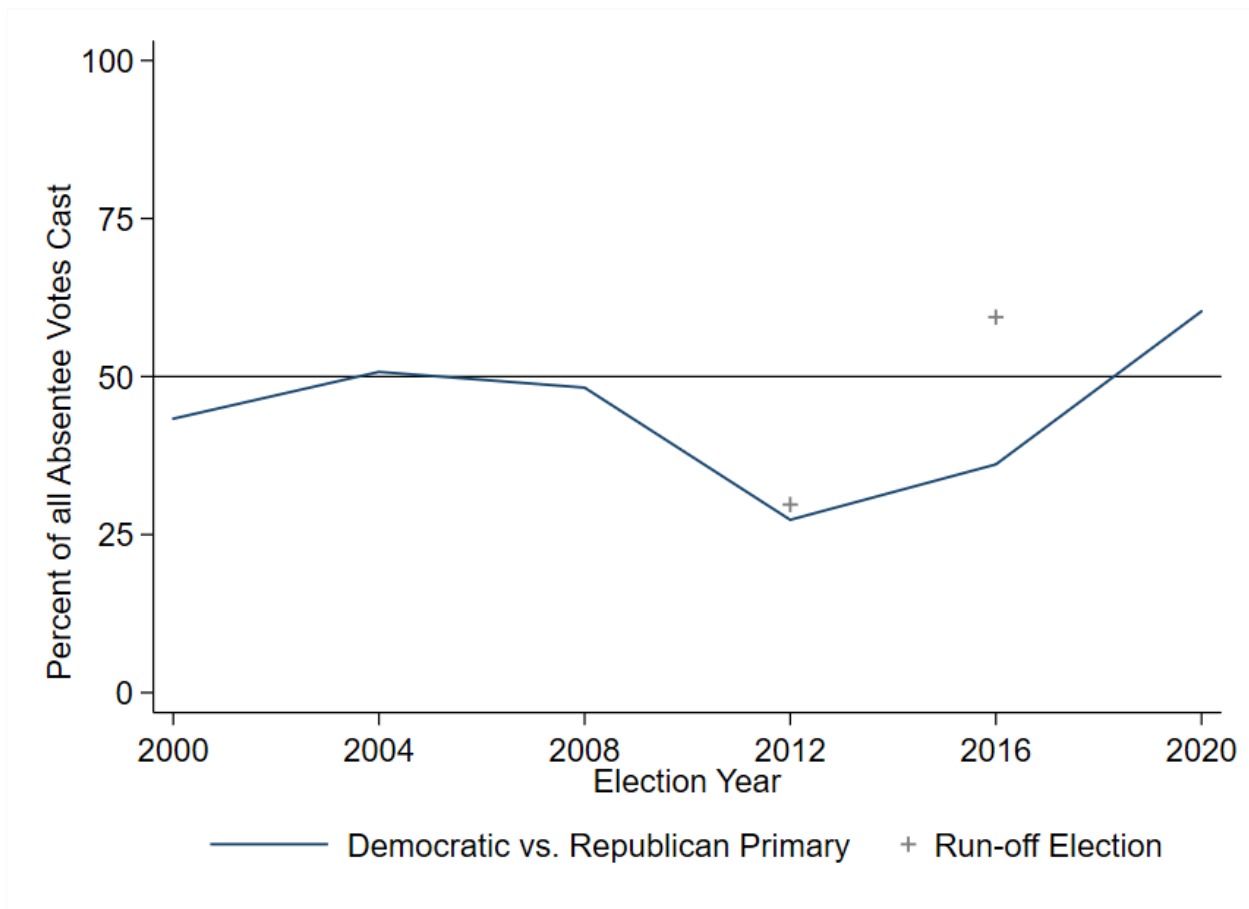


Figure 2, shows within the past six presidential primary elections there has only been a Democratic advantage among the number of absentee votes cast in the 2020 primary. The 2020 Texas Party Primary election occurred before Texas began to shut down schools or businesses the coronavirus outbreak. The Democratic Party primary attracted the most votes (51% - D, 49% - R) for the first time since the 2008 Joint Party Primary. Within the Democratic party primary, absentee ballots made up 5% of all ballots cast and 12% of the early votes cast. Similarly, in the Republican Party primary, absentee ballots made up 4.5% of all ballots cast and 8% of the early votes cast. The comparisons to all votes cast vary a little, because there were 185,107 more votes cast in the Democratic primary on Election Day following the momentum from a major endorsement event for Joe Biden that included Senator Amy Klobuchar, former Representative Beto O'Rourke, and former Mayor Pete Buttigieg.

Examining this topic further is interesting because Texas allows voters to cast early votes in-person without an excuse, but does not allow the same accommodation for votes by mail. The distribution of absentee ballots has historically been restricted, as seen by the requirement for sick people to vote in person up until 1982.<sup>9</sup> This suggests state officials rely strongly on election judges or non-political resource to verify the integrity of a ballot when greater accessibility is given.

### Competing Arguments About the Use of Absentee Voting in a Pandemic

The coronavirus pandemic introduced a new paradigm to consider the usefulness of absentee voting. States with no-excuse absentee voting were able to encourage voters to apply for ballots to reduce the use of polling locations and maintain social distancing. At the same time, President Trump spoke openly in opposition of absentee voting by using the argument that it reduced election integrity. This provided two contrasting frames for Texans to think about how they should vote during the coronavirus pandemic.

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<sup>9</sup> An amendment to the election code in 1981, allowed voters to request an absentee ballot by providing documentation from a doctor.



The likelihood that any decision about vote by mail in Texas would be framed within a partisan context increased when the Texas Democratic Party joined two lawsuits by counties across the state that hoped to expand the use absentee voting in their election administration (Biggers and Hamner 2015; Mann, Gronke, and Adana 2020). The two most notable counties in the lawsuit were Harris County and Travis County. The case, *Texas Democratic Party, et al. & Zachary Price, et al. v. The State of Texas*,<sup>10</sup> argued that Attorney General Ken Paxton’s interpretation that only Texans over the age of 65 could vote by mail to limit exposure to the coronavirus violated the equal protection of all voters under the Texas Constitution.<sup>11</sup> On May 20, 2020, the Texas Supreme Court ruled that vote by mail would continue to be limited and that counties should only permit registered voters who were sick, injured, or over the age of 65. Separately, *Texas Democratic Party et al. v. Greg Abbott, Ruth Hughes, and Ken Paxton*,<sup>12</sup> presented a similar argument to protect voters under the Fourteenth Amendment. In this case the judgment by the U.S. District Court determined that counties could accept absentee ballot applications by voters who cited concern about the threat of infection by voting in person. Texas appealed the decisions to the Fifth Circuit of the U.S. Court of Appeals by arguing that having vote by mail in some counties but not all would confuse voters. On June 4, 2020, the Fifth Circuit issued a stay on the federal order to expand vote by mail, citing their interest to not make a decision that would create a change on “the eve of an election.” Currently, the federal lawsuit has been appealed to the Supreme Court of the United States and counties have already begun distributing absentee ballots to registered voters with an acceptable excuse.

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<sup>10</sup> ([link](#))

<sup>11</sup> This is a link to the letter from the Attorney General’s Office:

[https://www.texasattorneygeneral.gov/sites/default/files/images/admin/2020/Press/Mail-in%20Ballot%20Guidance%20Letter\\_05012020.pdf?utm\\_content=&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_name=&utm\\_source=govdelivery&utm\\_term=](https://www.texasattorneygeneral.gov/sites/default/files/images/admin/2020/Press/Mail-in%20Ballot%20Guidance%20Letter_05012020.pdf?utm_content=&utm_medium=email&utm_name=&utm_source=govdelivery&utm_term=)

<sup>12</sup> ([link](#))

Following the federal court's decision, Interim Harris County Clerk Chris Hollins, a plaintiff in both cases, immediately sent absentee ballot applications out to all of the county's 400,000 registered voters over the age of 65 years old. Such an action indicates how quickly election administrators have acted in an attempt to prepare for what many expect to be an increase in the use of vote by mail in Texas. Although, the legal arguments may be grounded in the authority of local administrators to interpret state law having the Democratic Party and local officials are on the opposite side of a legal argument from the Attorney General (R-TX) creates a context that may entrench preferences for vote by mail along partisan lines.<sup>13</sup>

#### Revisiting Theories of Voter Opinions for Vote by Mail

The persistence of long lines at polling locations on Election Day and during early voting, have highlighted the need for providing convenience in voting. The alternatives to meet the demands of a growing electorate can be addressed by increasing the number of voting stations and staff, extending the days of voting, or offering new ways of voting. New election reforms provide a way to adapt elections without expanding the use of absentee voting. An element of assessing the convenience of each new innovation for in-person voting is the efficiency that election officials can move a voter through the voting location. The fewer minutes a person uses a machine to vote another person may vote sooner, allowing more people to vote in an hour (Pettigrew 2017). Maximizing the efficiency of a polling location is a rational objective to reduce the time one has to spend inside a building with other people. However, if there the ratio of voters using each piece of election equipment is not reduced during a pandemic there will be additional costs associated with reducing the threat of a virus in the polling location. Therefore, in a pandemic, the activities of cleaning devices and enforcing social

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<sup>13</sup> In the March 2020 primary, Proposition 8 on the Democratic Primary Ballot asked whether voting should be made easier; 96% of Democratic primary election voters agreed.

distancing between voters will reduce any previous efficiencies gained from new voter systems that help voters fill out their ballots faster.

I will explore this through arguments about why voters in Texas are more willing to use absentee voting now and why there are differences in which voters are willing to reform vote by mail in Texas. I begin with three separate assumptions based on scholarship and history of election administration in Texas. Each assumption is paired with a case example and hypothesis to establish a theory about why the acceptance of absentee voting is likely to be different during a public health crisis.

The first assumption is, when there is a significant and universal barrier to voter participation a remedy will be given to increase access. A supporting example of the assumption is that Governor Abbott issued a proclamation to extend early voting in the run-off election from one week to two weeks before the state or federal courts issued a judgment about the ability of voters to apply for absentee ballots. Although, the action did not favor the use of absentee voting the Republican executive recognized the public health threat of the coronavirus in the election. As a cue from a political elite, adding one more week of early voting will reduce ambivalence about absentee voting in the electorate (H1).

A second assumption is that the public is more likely to support alternatives to voting that help a category of voters in an abnormal situation (Tokaji and Colker 2007). The Texas election code specifies that vote by mail is an approved accommodation for voters that would be unable to vote in person or would risk further injury by voting in person. The statewide stay-at-home order during the month of April and later gradual reopening created an abnormal situation for all residents. Hence forth, individuals have exhibited different levels of risk acceptance to visit public places based on the coronavirus's ability to be transmitted from one person to another if someone else does not take precautions. Therefore, as voters recognize the coronavirus as a major threat they are more likely to see

this election as an abnormal situation for all voters and support the expanded use of absentee voting (H2).

The final assumption is that the public is informed that absentee voting exists but is less informed about the restrictions about who can use the vote by mail process.<sup>14</sup> The acceptance that an alternative is needed and that some voters in the electorate qualify for vote by mail, does not predict with certainty that an individual will support the expanded use of absentee voting or use the process themselves. However, if an individual is personally uncomfortable with going a polling location in their county they are more likely to seek a remote alternative. Therefore, individualism – specifically the wish to avoid voting in a public place – should be a strong predictor of the acceptance of absentee voting at this time (H3). Additionally, when an individual recognizes voting can be a threat to their health, they will be less likely to consider voting in an election (H4). From this perspective, the prolonged practice of absentee voting in Texas provides voters with a clear understanding that vote by mail is not likely to cause irreparable harm to the integrity of the elections in the state and representation of Texas residents.

#### Research Design

A survey experiment was conducted across two statewide surveys of random registered voters in the state of Texas. The first wave occurred in May 2020, shortly after Attorney General Ken Paxton issued the legal opinion that counties should not accept applications from individuals under 65 based on their concern for contracting the coronavirus (N=1,183). A large sample of voters in a state provides a broad and representative view of the electorate with a 2.87% margin of error.<sup>15</sup> A second survey between June

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<sup>14</sup> To an extent this also assumes voters implicitly consider vote by mail in their assessment of whether new election reforms should be adopted to increase voter convenience. Because Texas does not offer another unsupervised or remote voting alternative we cannot test whether absentee voting is better accepted as a way to protect ballot integrity over any other option (i.e. online primary voting or caucus voting).

<sup>15</sup> The sample of the first survey reflects a panel of respondents who participated in a statewide poll before the Texas Primary in March, as well as new respondents. There were 60% of voters in both waves; 40% were new in the May survey.

29 and July 9 will ask additional questions about how voters are approaching this election and whether they are concerned about voting in person.

The first survey asked voters about their support for an expansion of absentee voting (long term or short term). It also asked voters about the method of voting they preferred to cast their ballot in a pandemic. We can assume that voters have a clear understanding of the precautions needed to protect themselves from the virus, because the state was already under a state of emergency for a month and a half.

A second statewide survey is set to occur weeks after the two court decisions. However, the stay from the U.S. Circuit Court was only directed at the July run-off. The policy for the November election remains undetermined. The second survey will ask voters about their support for an extension of absentee voting. It will also ask if voters agreed that courts should avoid making decisions that require state officials to adjust operations in a crisis. Finally, in the midst of the outcome of legal decisions, voters will be asked who they trust to interpret the election code between federal judges, Texas Supreme Court, Attorney General Ken Paxton, and County Clerk.

The following analysis reflects logit and ordinal logit regression estimates of three dependent variables. The first model predicts the probability a voter will prefer to cast their ballot by mail in the election. The dependent variable is binary with the choice to vote by mail set at one and zero otherwise. The second and third models predict the how likely a voter is to participate in the election. Both the second and third models use the same dependent variable, which is an ordinal scale of how likely the voter is to participate in the primary run-off election; categories range from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1). Two more ordinal models are set to predict the how far into the future a voter would support expanding vote by mail; measured as oppose (0), elections in a pandemic (1), any election this year (2), and all future elections (3).

Each model includes a selection of eleven independent variables. These include six different ordinal measures that specify one of five attitudes including; how strong is the coronavirus as a threat, agreement that the virus is transmitted by personal interactions, agreement that it is important to take precautions to stop the spread of the virus, how comfortable a voter is voting in person, agreement that no-excuse absentee voting should be allowed, and trust that Governor Abbott to keep the public safe. A seven-point scale identifies the party identification of the voter from a strong Democrat (1), Independent with no party affiliation (4), to a strong Republican (7). There are also three binary variables to indicate whether the voter has avoided public places during the pandemic, is over 65, resides in a large metropolitan area, or lives in a rural area. These variables provide the necessary controls to identify how vote by mail is administered in Texas, as well as new elements that directly measure individual attitudes about vote by mail during a public health emergency.

#### Results:

In a context where reactions to the coronavirus have not been overtly partisan and the use of vote by mail is consistent across both parties, the survey results suggest broader influences are shaping public opinion about vote by mail. The public's feelings about their own health are informing voter opinions about vote by mail and doing so in a way that supports the inclusion of all voters, which is consistent with the no-excuse absentee policies of other states.

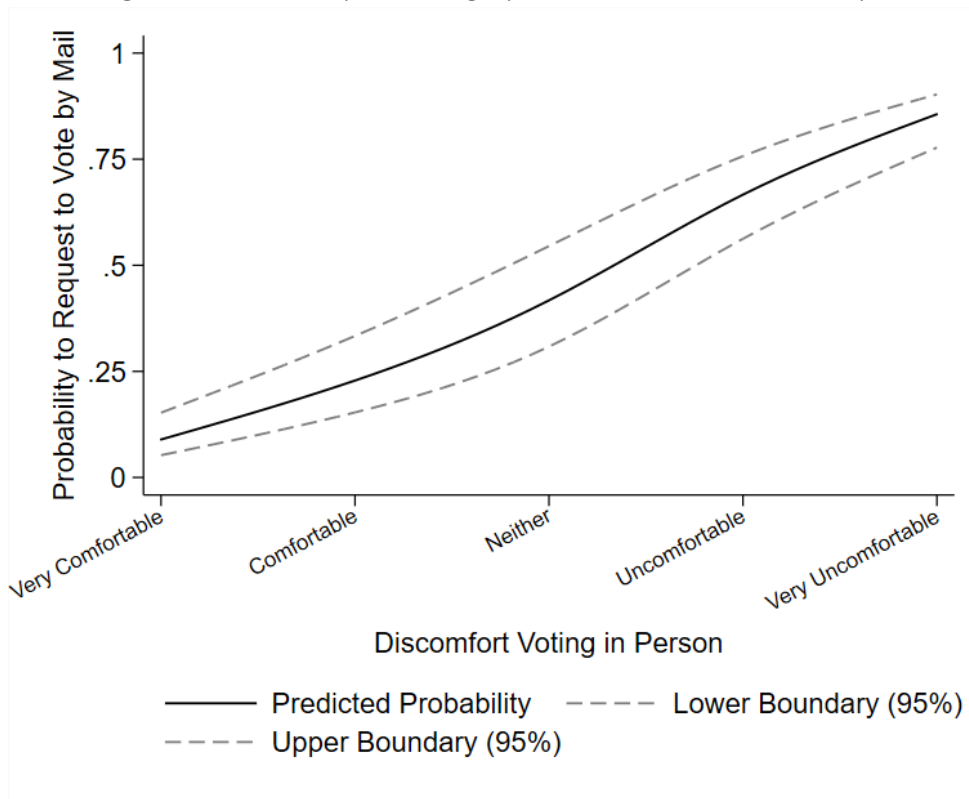
The probability that a voter will select to vote by mail in this upcoming election will be shaped by the individual's assessment of the coronavirus, age, and the voter's attitude towards absentee voting. The model in Table 1 uses responses by individuals who voted in the March primary to estimate the likelihood they will return to vote in the May run-off. The stronger a voter's discomfort in thinking about visiting a polling location, the more likely a voter will prefer to vote by mail. This fits the objective of absentee voting as an alternative, but this indicates that county officials should expect to receive more applications for absentee ballots. If this occurs the state of Texas is likely to see an increase in the rate of

rejected absentee ballot applications if county clerks adhere to the guidance of the state’s Attorney General. Additionally, null results for the recognition of the coronavirus as a major threat and efforts to take precautions, suggest pro-social behaviors during the pandemic may not translate to voting behavior.

Table 1: Likelihood of Voting by Mail in Texas 2020 Primary Run-off

	Prefer Vote by Mail
COVID is a major threat	0.22 (0.15)
Virus Can be Transmitted	-0.08 (0.11)
Take Precautions	0.24 (0.19)
Avoided Public Places during the Outbreak	-0.01 (0.23)
Discomfort Voting During a Pandemic	0.76* (0.07)
Party Strength	-0.08* (0.03)
Support for Vote by Mail	0.57* (0.08)
Over 65	0.99* (0.20)
Trust Gov. Abbott	0.15* (0.06)
Metro	0.42* (0.20)
Rural	-0.06 (0.25)
Constant	-6.97 (0.96)
Wald	234.5
N	911

Figure 3: Probability of Voting by Mail in Texas 2020 Primary Run-off



The effect of the coronavirus on a voter’s plans to vote in an upcoming election are seen in Table 2, including the variables used to predict why a voter is likely to become more likely to vote. A voter’s age and their perception of how safe it is to vote plays a significant role in whether they will turn out to vote. There is not a significant relationship as to whether a voter agrees the coronavirus is a major threat. Much of the initial effect is explained by differences in the voter’s belief that it is important to take precautions to stop the spread of the coronavirus the less likely the voter will turn out. Also, voters who have already been avoiding public places are less likely to vote in a run-off. Across all levels of party strength we do not see a significant difference in the likelihood of voting in the run-off election. This is not unexpected, because there are many contested elections to determine the nominees for U.S. House and local offices in both parties.



Table 2: Odds of Voting in Texas 2020 Primary Run-off

	Likelihood of Voting in Run-off
COVID is a major threat	0.98 (0.12)
Virus Can be Transmitted	1.03 (0.10)
Take Precautions	0.66* (0.10)
Avoided Public Places during the Outbreak	0.70 (0.14)
Discomfort Voting During a Pandemic	1.47* (0.10)
Party Strength	1.05 (0.04)
Support for Vote by Mail	- -
Over 65	0.64* (0.11)
Trust Gov. Abbott	1.05 (0.06)
Metro	0.81 (0.16)
Rural	1.04 (0.22)
Constant	
Wald	47.4
N	911

The connection between the life experience and memory of holding an election during a pandemic favors options change the Texas election code to increase access for voting that do not involve personal interactions. A voter's belief that COVID-19 is a major threat is a positive predictor that the voter would support a rule change to allow vote by mail for all registered voters in Texas. Registered voters who are less comfortable voting in person are also significantly more interested in using an accessible alternative to cast a ballot. Additionally, Party identification continues to be a strong predictor of support for absentee voting, with strong Democratic Party voters being the most likely to support an expansion of vote by mail. We also see that voters under the age of 65, who are unable to vote by mail unless they are injured are more likely to favor a more expansive vote by mail law. Inversely, this means that voters

already eligible to request an absentee ballot are significantly more likely vote by mail during the outbreak but they are less interested in supporting other voters to have the same access.

Table 3: Odds of Supporting an Expanded Vote by Mail Law in Texas

	Expansion of Absentee Voting
COVID is a major threat	1.91* (0.24)
Virus Can be Transmitted	1.13 (0.12)
Take Precautions	0.88 (0.14)
Avoided Public Places during the Outbreak	0.68 (0.15)
Discomfort Voting During a Pandemic	1.23* (0.08)
Party Strength	0.80* (0.03)
Over 65	0.71* (0.11)
Trust Gov. Abbott	1.14* (0.07)
Metro	1.04 (0.21)
Rural	0.98 (0.19)
Wald	184.1
N	907

The models identify two interest null effects. Although, voters who have avoided public places were likely to change their voting behavior they are not any more likely to consider a vote by mail option or support a change in policy. Similarly, the weak relationship between a voter’s trust in how Governor Abbott is handling the coronavirus and the Governor’s policy position on absentee voting suggests Abbott’s position is not serving as a strong cue for voters. Finally, although, absentee voting often makes up a larger share of early-votes in Texas’s largest counties, there are no significant differences between the opinions of voters in Texas across urban and rural areas.

## Discussion

The opinions of Texas voters gained from this survey indicated that there is a critical role for vote by mail in elections where the normal process of voting is uncertain. As we present different frames where a voter may accept vote by mail as an alternative, we find that personal health is a primary consideration that all attitudes are conditioned on. Using the coronavirus pandemic as a public health emergency that affects all voters; we find the foundational principles of how people will prefer to vote in the future and how they consider the voting behavior of others (Nickerson 2008).

Voter opinions about the use of absentee voting are not likely to change universally in a crisis. When individuals are extremely uncomfortable with voting, they will wish to seek remote alternatives to participate. Additionally, Generation X, Millennial, and Generation Z voters do not have the same memories of past voter fraud in major cities that voters over the age of 65 do. As a result, voters under the age of 65, prefer changes that increase the options of convenience for voting.

Additionally, related to this emergency, there is no direct evidence that political elites wield significant leverage over shaping the public's opinion. The insignificant effect between the public's trust that Governor Abbott will keep the state safe and healthy and any measure related to absentee voting suggests there is ambivalence to the Governor's position to limit the use of absentee voting. One caveat that must be made is that Governor Abbott's rhetoric has been more inclusive about solving this problem than that of Lt. Governor Dan Patrick or Attorney General Ken Paxton.

Understanding how attitudes towards vote by mail are changing during the coronavirus outbreak is important in predicting how voters will participate in future elections. Estimates of how likely a voter is to vote by mail increased significantly for voters who supported no-excuse absentee voting. This is particularly important for county clerks like Chis Hollins in Harris County who see substantial variation election-to-election with the use of absentee ballots.

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