

# The Impact of COVID-19 Surges on Voter Behavior in the 2020 US General Election

Paul S. Herrnson, University of Connecticut  
Charles Stewart III, Massachusetts Institute of  
Technology

ESRA 2023, Athens, GA,  
May 31-June 2, 2023

# Did COVID surges, voting policies, and partisanship lead to changes in voter behavior in 2020?

## + Answers:

- COVID & policy changes had limited effects on turnout.
- COVID & policy changes had effects on modes of voting
  - + Early COVID surges had bigger effects
  - + States that liberalized in 2020 showed smaller effects on mail-ballot use
  - + Voters in Democratic counties took advantage of mail-ballot liberalizations more than voters in Republican counties

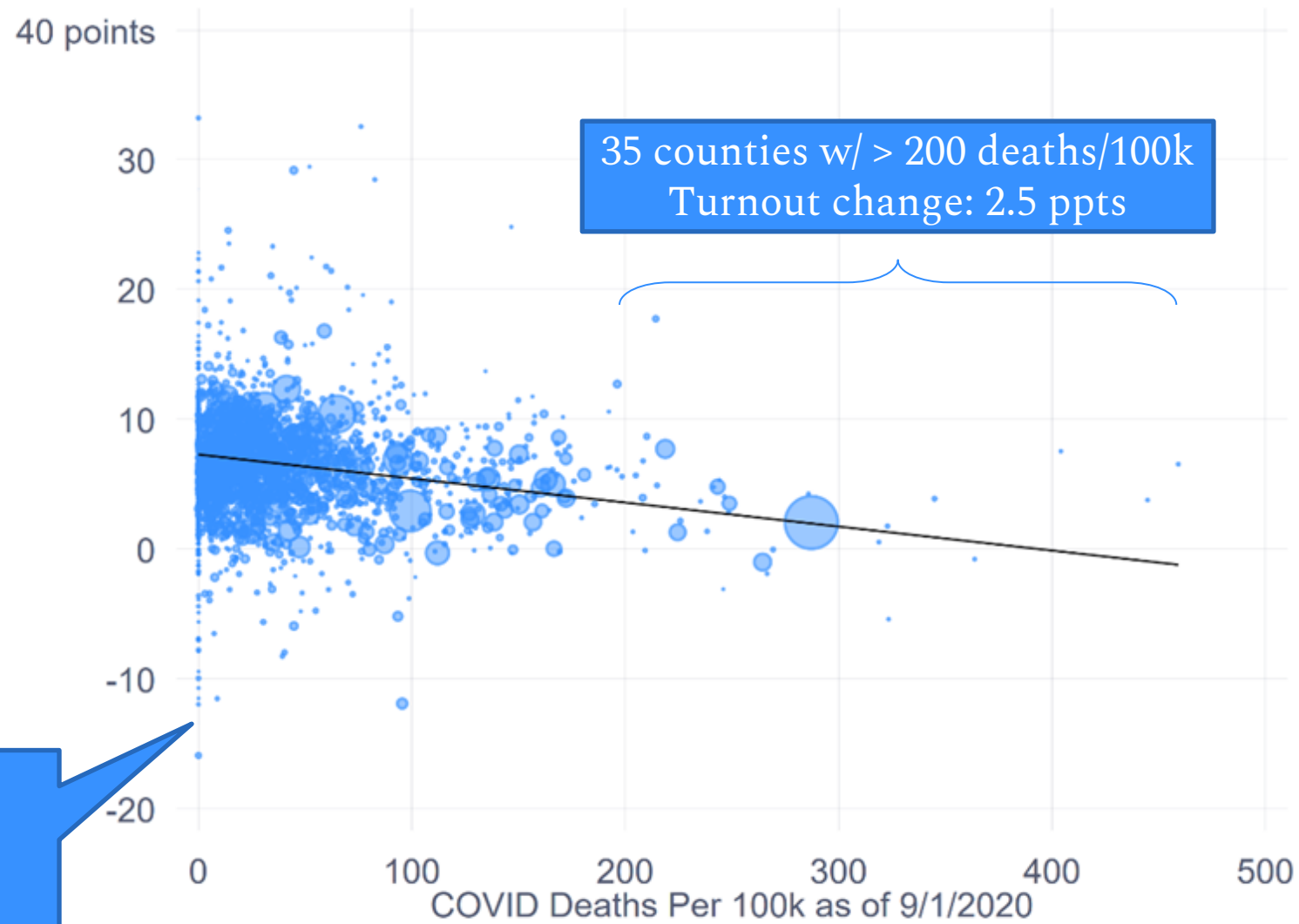
## + Data and methods

- County level: 2020 and 2016 EAVS\*, COVID surges, partisanship, Census (demographics)
- State level: voting policies, competition, etc.
- Regression analysis: fixed effects, non-fixed with controls

\* Shortcoming with EAVS → 11 states excluded from the analysis



# COVID deaths and change in turnout, 2016-20



452 counties w/ 0  
deaths  
Turnout change: 5.9  
ppts

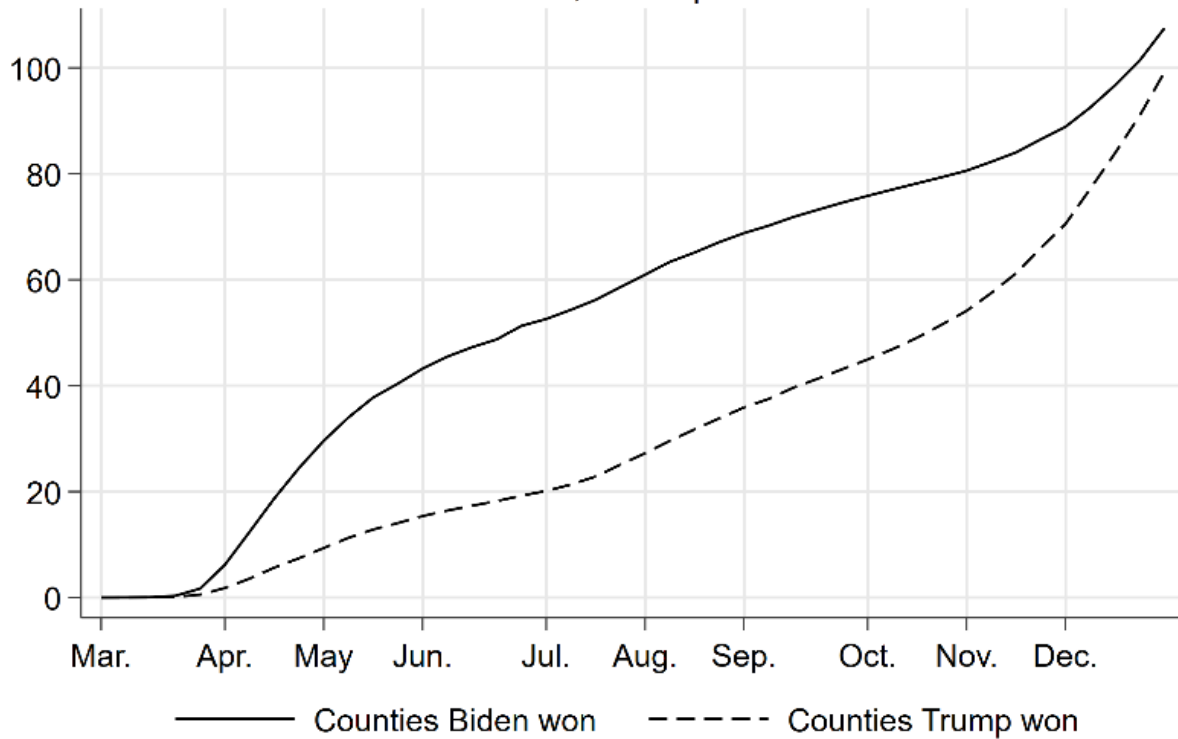


# Effects of COVID on voter behavior, 2016-2020

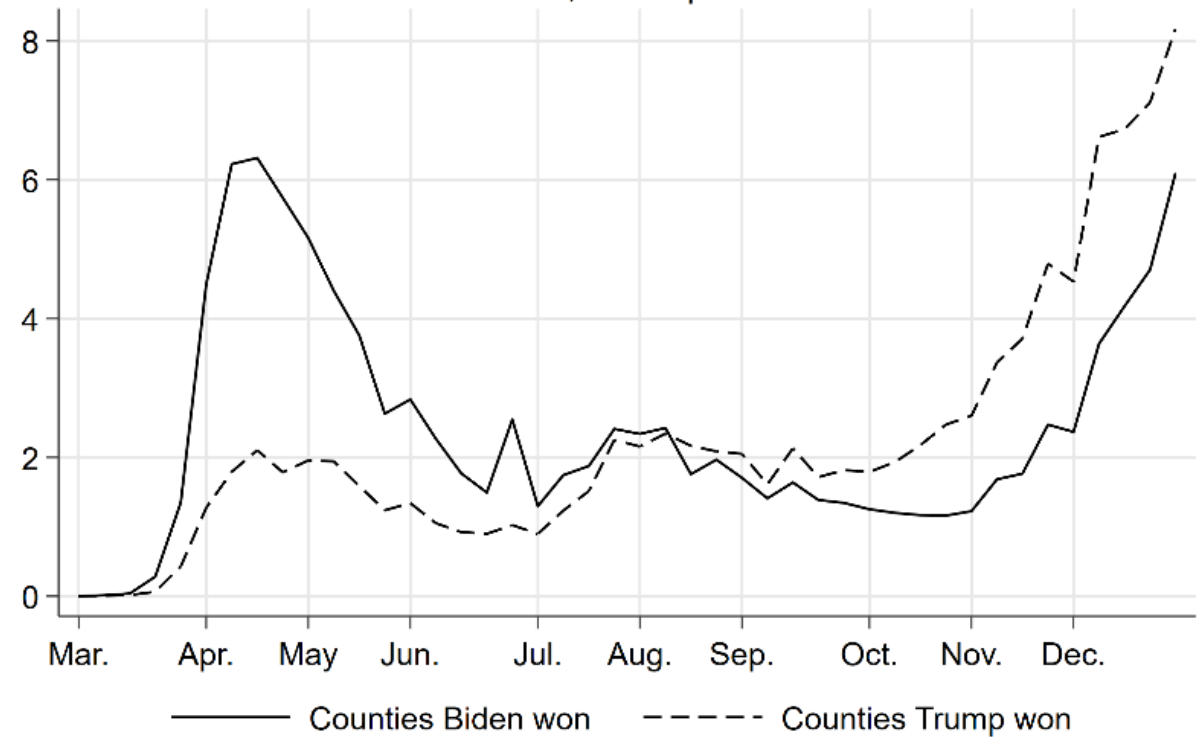
	Mail	Early	Election Day
COVID deaths	0.394* (0.177)	0.0736 (0.107)	-0.484*** (0.087)
<b>Voting policies</b>			
No Excuse	0.0858*** (0.0261)	-0.0665* (0.0228)	-0.0243 (0.0147)
Universal VBM	0.323*** (0.043)	-0.123*** (0.037)	-0.221*** (0.031)
Excuse required (ref. cat.)	0	0	0
Early voting	-0.0503 (0.0370)	0.211*** (0.028)	-0.169*** (0.019)
Year = 2020	0.104*** (0.0185)	0.0461** (0.0171)	-0.131*** (0.011)
Intercept	0.204*** (0.0203)	0.0856*** (0.0166)	0.699*** (0.0130)
R <sup>2</sup>	.725	.348	.824
N	5,431	5,431	5,431

# COVID Deaths by County Partisanship

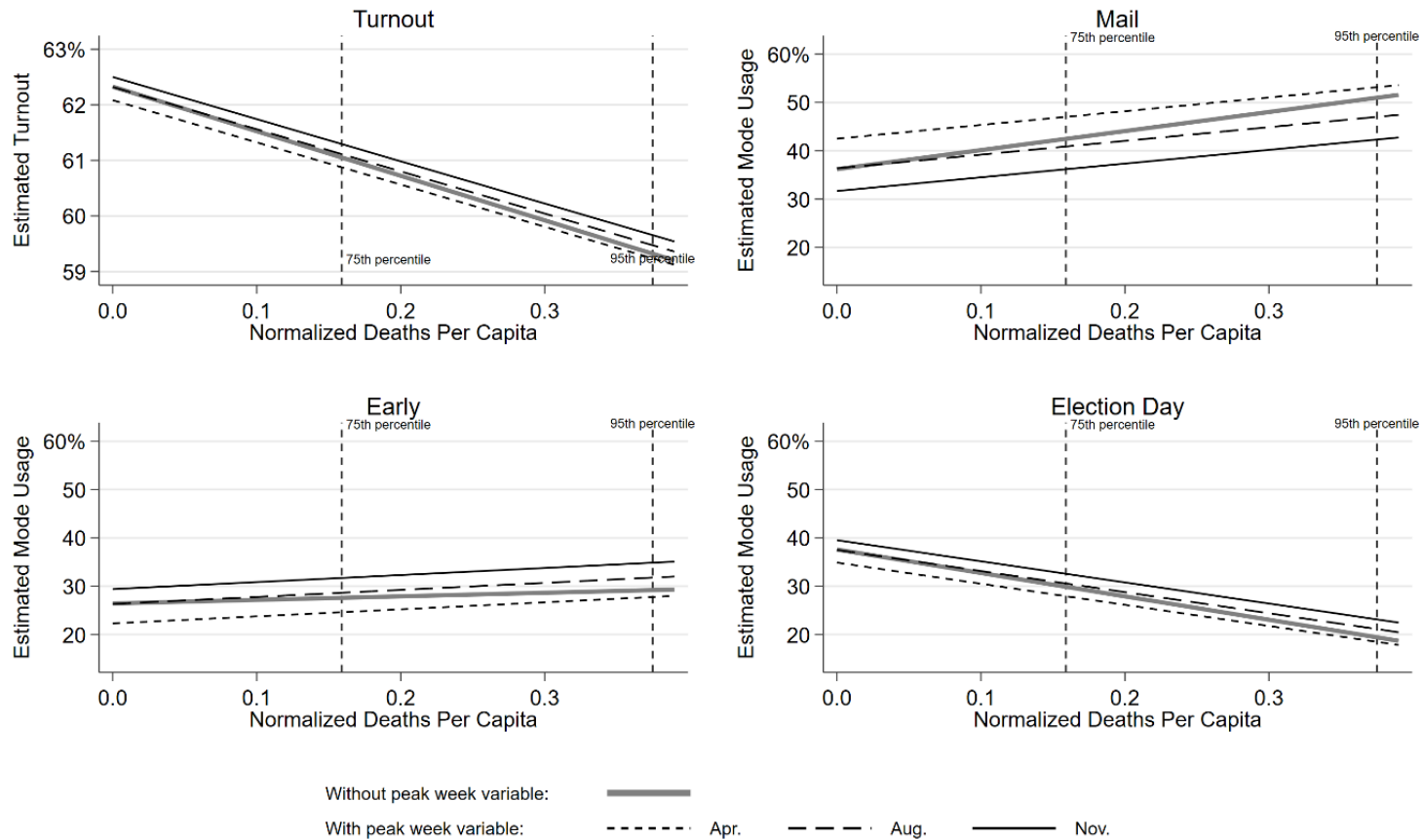
Cumulative Deaths by Week  
Per 100,000 Population



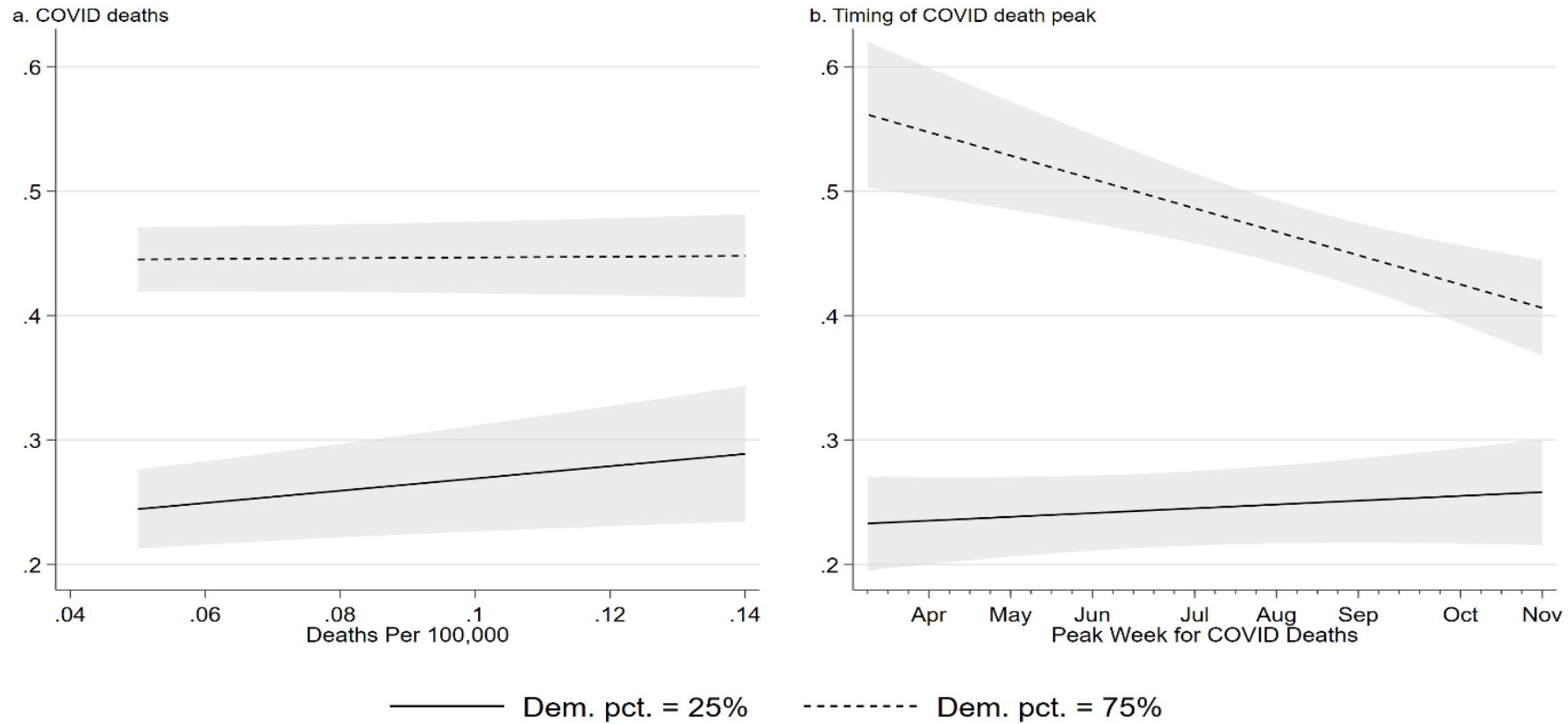
New Deaths by Week  
Per 100,000 Population



# Influence of timing of COVID surge on turnout and voting method used

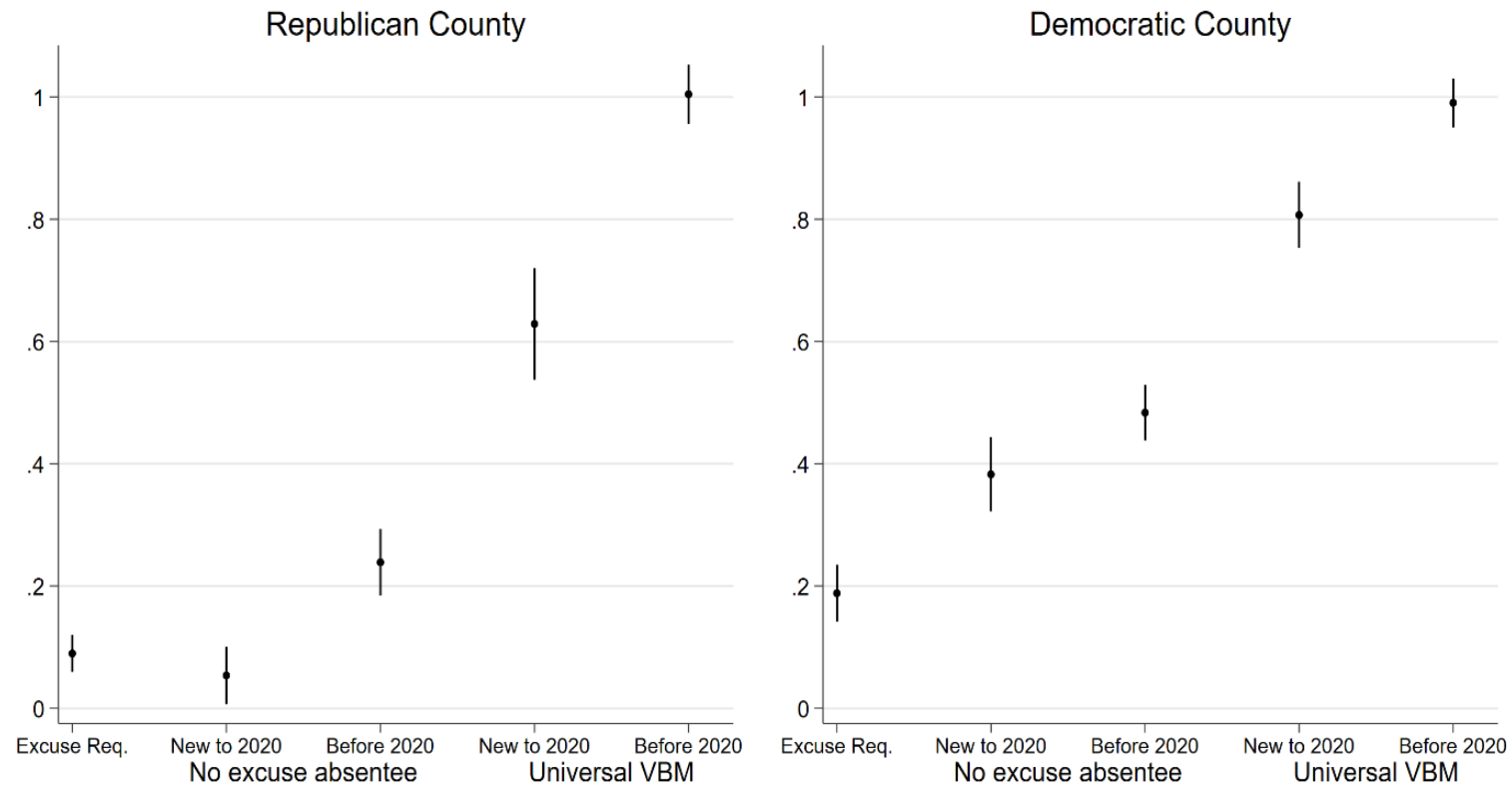


# Votes cast with a mail ballot... Effects of timing of COVID deaths interacted with partisanship



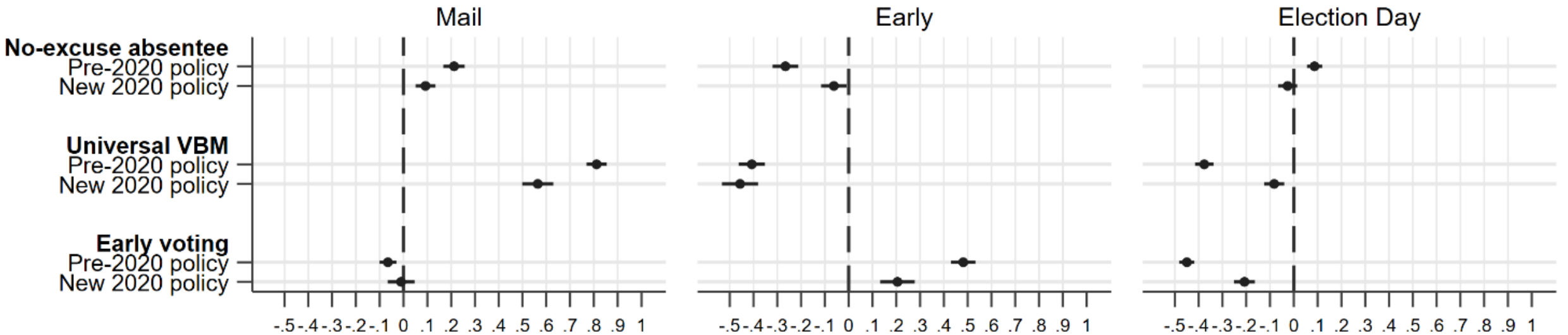
# Votes cast with a mail ballot... Effects of timing of mail ballot policy adoption interacted with partisanship

c. Timing of mail ballot reforms





# Effect of policy on vote method used by the timing of policy adoptions



# Conclusion

- +COVID → turnout, voting method used
- +Timing of COVID surges: early surge → bigger impact
- +Voting policies → voting method used
  - Pre-2020 adoption → greater use of mail & early voting
- +Partisanship → voting method used
  - Synergies with timing of COVID surges & policy change
  - Familiarity with voting options

Thank you

Charles Stewart  
cstewart@mit.edu

Paul Herrnson  
paul.Herrnson@uconn.edu

