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

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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

35 counties w/ > 200 deaths/100k
Turnout change: 2.5 ppts
## Effects of COVID on voter behavior, 2016-2020

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mail</th>
<th>Early</th>
<th>Election Day</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>COVID deaths</strong></td>
<td>0.394*</td>
<td>0.0736</td>
<td>-0.484***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.177)</td>
<td>(0.107)</td>
<td>(0.087)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Voting policies</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Excuse</td>
<td>0.0858***</td>
<td>-0.0665*</td>
<td>-0.0243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.0261)</td>
<td>(0.0228)</td>
<td>(0.0147)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universal VBM</td>
<td>0.323***</td>
<td>-0.123***</td>
<td>-0.221***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.043)</td>
<td>(0.037)</td>
<td>(0.031)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excuse required (ref. cat.)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early voting</td>
<td>-0.0503</td>
<td>0.211***</td>
<td>-0.169***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.0370)</td>
<td>(0.028)</td>
<td>(0.019)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year = 2020</td>
<td>0.104***</td>
<td>0.0461**</td>
<td>-0.131***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.0185)</td>
<td>(0.0171)</td>
<td>(0.011)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>0.204***</td>
<td>0.0856***</td>
<td>0.699***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.0203)</td>
<td>(0.0166)</td>
<td>(0.0130)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>R²</strong></td>
<td>.725</td>
<td>.348</td>
<td>.824</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>N</strong></td>
<td>5,431</td>
<td>5,431</td>
<td>5,431</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
COVID Deaths by County Partisanship

Cumulative Deaths by Week
Per 100,000 Population

New Deaths by Week
Per 100,000 Population

- Counties Biden won
- Counties Trump won
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
Effect of policy on vote method used by the timing of policy adoptions
Conclusion

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

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