



CALIFORNIA JOURNAL OF POLITICS AND POLICY



Special Issue • October 2020

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SACRAMENTO

CALIFORNIA JOURNAL OF POLITICS AND POLICY

Dedication

Gerald C. Lubenow, 1939-2020

This special issue of the California Journal of Politics and Policy is dedicated to the memory of its longtime editor, Jerry Lubenow, who passed away on July 21 in Berkeley, California at the age of 80.

Jerry's distinguished and eventful career in journalism included his longtime stint as the San Francisco bureau chief of Newsweek and his role as the quiet and unassuming raconteur at the center of a monthly lunch group of San Francisco's leading political figures. Jerry came to UC Berkeley in the 1990s as the director of publications at the Institute of Governmental Studies, where he nurtured and guided many vital projects, including this journal. Deeply connected in both spheres but without ever dropping a name, Jerry was able to bridge the worlds of scholars and practitioners like no other. We hope that Jerry's his commitment to bring rigorous research to bear on the practical policy problems faced by the Golden State will continue to guide the CJPP going forward.

Those who want to learn more about Jerry's extraordinary life – which included falling into a bed of coals in a hot furnace in his hometown of Sheboygan, Wisconsin, covering news stories from the assassination of Martin Luther King to the kidnapping of Patty Hearst to being offered, and refusing, the job of press secretary to Nancy Reagan to experiencing the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake from the beer line at Candlestick Park – can read his obituaries in the San Francisco Chronicle and the Daily Cal.



Special Issue • October 2020

CALIFORNIA JOURNAL OF POLITICS AND POLICY

SPECIAL ISSUE: HOW ELECTION REFORMS, PARTICIPATION TRENDS, AND COVID-19 WILL SHAPE CALIFORNIA'S 2020 ELECTION

Special Issue Co-Editors

Cheryl Boudreau, University of California, Davis

Thad Kousser, University of California, San Diego

Editor

Edward L. Lascher, Jr., California State University, Sacramento

Associate Editor

Wesley Hussey, California State University, Sacramento

Editorial Board

Brian Adams, San Diego State University

Elizabeth Bergman, California State University, East Bay

Shaun Bowler, University of California, Riverside

James Brighton, Alameda County Superior Court

Jeffrey Cummins, California State University, Fresno

Joshua Dyck, University of Massachusetts, Lowell

Stacy Gordon Fisher, Foundation for California Community Colleges

Christopher Francis, California State Senate Budget Committee

José Henriquez, El Dorado County Local Agency Formation Commission

Thad Kousser, University of California, San Diego

Brie Lindsey, California Council on Science and Technology

Seth Masket, University of Denver

Julianne McCall

Eric McGhee, Public Policy Institute of California

Kimberley Nadler, California State University, Sacramento

Rebecca Rabovsky, Senate Office of Research

Jennifer Robinson, University of Utah

Gary Segura, University of California, Los Angeles

Jessica Trounstine, University of California, Merced

Renée Van Vechten, University of Redlands





COMMENTARY

ENSURING THAT EVERY VOTE COUNTS: PROTECTING HISTORICALLY DISENFRANCHISED COMMUNITIES' ACCESS TO THE BALLOT DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Christina Fletes-Romo, ACLU of California
Brittany Stonesifer, ACLU of California
Julia Gomez, ACLU of California

The 2020 election season was set to be busy for the voting rights team at the ACLU of California. In preparation, we were gearing up for one of the most consequential elections of our lifetime. Our goal was clear: continue working to remove structural barriers to voter registration and participation in California's elections with a specific focus on historically marginalized communities to ensure that limited English proficient individuals, people impacted by the criminal justice system, people with disabilities, and other underrepresented communities are not intentionally or inadvertently excluded from our democracy. We set to advance these goals by continuing our work on the successful and equitable implementation of the Voter's Choice Act (VCA), particularly in Fresno, Sacramento, and Los Angeles Counties; monitoring the Motor Voter Program;¹ and expanding language access for different language communities.² We were similarly preparing for a ballot campaign to restore voting rights to

¹ "Voting Rights Groups Sue California for Voter Suppression: Legal Action taken due to State's Failure to Comply with 'Motor Voter' Law," ACLU of Northern California, May 9, 2017 Press Release, available at <https://www.aclunc.org/news/voting-rights-groups-sue-california-voter-suppression>; "Voting Rights Groups Reach Agreement on Next Steps for Review and Accountability for Processing of Voter Registrations at DMV," ACLU of Northern California, Feb. 4, 2019 Press Release, available at <https://www.aclunc.org/news/voting-rights-groups-reach-agreement-next-steps-review-and-accountability-processing-voter>.

² "Voting Rights Victory for Limited-English Citizens," ACLU of Northern California, Nov. 4, 2019 Press Release, available at <https://www.aclunc.org/news/voting-rights-victory-limited-english-citizens>; "Secretary of State Denies Arabic- and Somali-Speaking Voters Language-Appropriate Services to Ensure Their Right to Vote This November," ACLU of Northern California, Aug. 6, 2020 Press Release, available at <https://www.aclunc.org/news/secretary-state-denies-arabic-and-somali-speaking-voters-language-appropriate-services-ensure>.



Californians who have completed their prison term,³ while ensuring that individuals in jails were empowered to vote.⁴

COVID-19 did not upend those plans. Instead, the pandemic, together with the Black Lives Matter protests across the state and our country, shined a harsh light on the continued systems of racial oppression and xenophobia plaguing our country from inception, further underscoring how critical and timely the policies we are working on to expand access to the ballot are to ensure that all communities have a say in decisions and policies to help reimagine their communities. When the pandemic hit California we, along with other voting rights advocates, were forced to react to new challenges and uncertainty to the way the election would be administered, while continuing to uplift the needs of historically disenfranchised communities.

As COVID-19 began to spread in March, three significant challenges became apparent. First, many of the typical poll workers, who tend to be older and thus more susceptible to the virus, would no longer be able to or feel comfortable enough to work the polls come November. Second, certain voting locations would simply not work: some locations, such as garages, would be too small and therefore not allow for proper social distancing; some locations, such as retirement homes, were too proximate to vulnerable populations, and therefore risky; and some locations, such as certain government buildings or large convention spaces, would be in too high demand for other emergency needs such as shelters and makeshift hospitals. Third, there was a lack of information about the virus, who it affected, and how long it would last. At the time, there were reports that children may be spared but there was no information about how the virus would eventually disproportionately impact communities of color.⁵ Similarly, it was unclear whether the virus and shelter-in-place policies would still be in place in the fall. All these challenges and uncertainties threatened the election and we were concerned that the impact would disproportionately fall on historically disenfranchised communities.

³ “Free the Vote for Californians on Parole (ACA 6),” ACLU of Northern California (last accessed Aug. 15, 2020), available at <https://www.aclunc.org/our-work/legislation/free-vote-californians-parole-aca-6>.

⁴ Let Me Vote website, ACLU of California (last accessed Aug. 15, 2020) available at <https://www.letmevoteca.org/>.

⁵ Across California, COVID-19 has ravished low-income, Latinx, and Black communities, as well as those who are incarcerated or detained. See for example Rong-Gong Lin II et al, “Coronavirus is killing more Californians than ever before, and cruel inequities are worsening,” *Los Angeles Times* July 24, 2020, available at <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-07-24/coronavirus-hospitalizations-for-children-younger-adults-dramatically-worsen-in-l-a-county>; Nadia Lopez, “California Latinos are among the hardest hit by COVID-19. Experts blame systemic racism,” *Fresno Bee* July 30, 2020, available at <https://www.fresnobee.com/news/coronavirus/article244586767.html>. In Los Angeles County, for example, Latinxs are more than twice as likely than whites to get COVID-19, according to Rong-Gong Lin II, “Latinos now twice as likely as whites to get coronavirus in L.A. County,” *Los Angeles Times* (July 10, 2020), available at <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-07-10/l-a-countys-latinos-residents-contracting-coronavirus-faster-than-other-groups>.



It was also in March that the California Secretary of State convened a working group that we participated in to discuss challenges and potential changes to the way the November election would have to be administered.

In the working group, there were two significant overarching policy questions presented. The first question was how to ensure that voters did not have to choose between their health and their right to vote. One of the key ways to achieve this, and one change that we advocated for,⁶ was through expanding access to voting at home. We understood this to be a commonsense way to protect the vote, since many Californians were already using vote-by-mail: 65% of California voters returned their ballots by mail in the November 2018 general election and 72% in the March 2020 primary election.⁷ We also had experience working with counties that had adopted the VCA and knew that over half of California voters lived in a VCA county and that those in every VCA county except Los Angeles were already automatically receiving their ballots in the mail.⁸ Eventually, California Governor Gavin Newsom would sign Executive Order N-64-20⁹ requiring that all registered voters automatically receive a ballot in the mail. The California legislature codified that requirement in Assembly Bill 860 and added safeguards to ensure that as many valid ballots postmarked by Election Day would be counted.

⁶ “Revised Recommendations for California’s November 2020 Elections,” Letter from Advocates to Governor Newsom and Secretary Padilla, May 22, 2020, available at <https://www.aclunc.org/sites/default/files/Revised%20Recommendations%20for%20California%E2%80%99s%20November%202020%20Elections%205-22-20.pdf>.

⁷ Historical Vote-by-Mail (Absentee) Ballot Use in California, California Secretary of State, accessed Aug. 14, 2020, available at <https://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/historical-absentee/>

⁸ “Over Half of State’s Voters to be Covered by Voter’s Choice Act for 2020 Elections as Tuolumne County Becomes 14th County to Adopt Reform,” California Secretary of State, Press Release, June 26, 2019, available at <https://www.sos.ca.gov/administration/news-releases-and-advisories/2019-news-releases-and-advisories/over-half-states-voters-be-covered-voters-choice-act-2020-elections-tuolumne-county-becomes-14th-county-adopt-reform/>.

⁹ Executive Order N-64-20, Executive Department of the State of California, May 5, 2020, available at <https://www.gov.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/05.08.2020-EO-N-64-20-signed.pdf>; “ACLU of California Statement on the Governor’s Executive Order on the November General Election,” ACLU of Northern California, May 8, 2020 Press Release, available at <https://www.aclunc.org/news/aclu-california-statement-governor-s-executive-order-november-general-election-0>.



Since these policy actions were taken, we have worked to ensure their success. For example, we have worked to counteract attacks¹⁰ and false claims¹¹ on the security of voting by mail by issuing correct information on voting by mail.¹² We have also worked with the California Secretary of State's office to strengthen California's vote-by-mail and ballot processing system to ensure that all valid ballots are counted.¹³ Together, stronger policies and voter education will help to make vote-by-mail a success in California.

The second significant policy question was whether and how to keep in-person voting locations open. We knew that relying on vote-by-mail alone was not enough, and without meaningful and safe opportunities to vote in person many already-underrepresented voters would be disenfranchised this November.¹⁴ In person voting locations are essential for several reasons. Vote-by-mail may not be an option for voters who are experiencing housing instability, and we are likely to see a greater number of displaced voters this November due to the economic fallout from the pandemic. Many of these voters may not have a stable address to register at in time to receive their vote by mail ballot. Voters with limited-English proficiency or disabilities rely on services that are provided at in-person voting locations. For example, limited-English proficient voters may need to access a translated reference ballot (otherwise known as a facsimile ballot) to help them vote on the English ballot. Black, Latinx, and Native American voters are also historically less likely to use vote-by-mail and may be less accustomed to vote-by-mail procedures and prefer voting in person.¹⁵ New and infrequent voters

¹⁰ See Jeremy White, "Issa sues California over November mail-ballot election," *POLITICO* May 21, 2020, available at <https://www.politico.com/states/california/story/2020/05/21/issa-sues-california-over-november-mail-ballot-election-1285467>; Laura Newberry, "Republicans sue Newsom over vote-by-mail order for November election," *Los Angeles Times* May 24, 2020, available at <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-05-24/republicans-sue-newsom-over-vote-by-mail-order-for-november-election>.

¹¹ See Stephanie Saul and Reid J. Epstein, "Trump Is Pushing a False Argument on Vote-by-Mail Fraud. Here Are the Facts," *New York Times* Aug. 3, 2020, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/article/mail-in-voting-explained.html>

¹² "Vote-by-Mail: Safe, Secure, Reliable," ACLU of Southern California, last accessed Aug. 15, 2020, available at <https://www.aclusocal.org/en/vote-mail-safe-secure-reliable>.

¹³ "Request for the Secretary of State to Promulgate Emergency Regulations in Accordance with AB 1970," Letter to the California Secretary of State dated July 17, 2020, available at https://www.aclunc.org/sites/default/files/Letter_to_Secretary_of_State_re_Compliance_with_AB%201970.pdf; "Proposed Regulations," Letter to the California Secretary of State dated Aug. 5, 2020, available at https://www.aclunc.org/sites/default/files/Final_Regulations_Letter_8-5-20.pdf.

¹⁴ Stonesifer, Brittany & Christina Fletes, "Vote by Mail Not Enough, California Must Also Require Minimum Number of In-person Polls for November Elections, ACLU of Northern California Blog, May 21, 2020, available at <https://www.aclunc.org/blog/vote-mail-not-enough-california-must-also-require-minimum-number-person-polls-november>.

¹⁵ "The California Voter Experience: Why African-American Voters Choose to Vote at the Polls or Vote-by-Mail, and How They Perceive Proposed Changes to California's Voting System," UC Davis Center for Regional Change/California Civic Engagement Project (Sept. 2016), available at <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57b8c7ce15d5dbf599fb46ab/t/57ffe66ff7e0abb9f7b5f3e6/1476388465082/UC>



would also greatly benefit from in-person voting locations to take advantage of the newly-enacted policy we sponsored,¹⁶ California's same day registration law, that allows all eligible voters to register to vote, update their voter registration, and vote in person up to and on Election Day. Understanding the importance of keeping in-person voting options, Governor Newsom signed Executive Order N-67-20¹⁷ and the California legislature enacted Senate Bill 423 to ensure that many voting locations remain open.

These two policies are critical to safeguarding our democracy this fall. However, many historically disenfranchised communities are still at risk of not being able to exercise their vote this fall and there is work left to do between now and November. First, elections officials, public assistance offices, community advocates, and civil rights organizations – the ACLU of California included -- must do everything we can to urge Californians to register to vote and to educate the public on the different voting options. This includes reaching out to voters who are in county jails, voters in medical and treatment facilities, and new and young voters. This also must be a multilingual effort. Second, election officials must do as much as they can to collect voter's language needs and send them voting information and materials in their language. Third, Californians must do their part to ensure that our elections can be properly administered by signing up to serve as poll workers and helping election officials identify voting locations.

This November 2020 election represents a critical moment for our country and democracy. Despite the many administrative and societal challenges, including the ways in which our differences and disparities have been made more apparent, we have an opportunity and responsibility to use all of this as momentum to make our democracy fairer and more inclusive.

[DavisCCEPCVEBriefTwo.pdf](#); "The California Voter Experience: Vote-by-Mail vs. the Polls," UC Davis Center for Regional Change/California Civic Engagement Project (July 2016), available at <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57b8c7ce15d5dbf599fb46ab/t/57ffe6bfe3df28f75af48b3b/1476388544252/UCDavisCCEPCVEBrief1.pdf>; "Vote by Mail in Native American Communities," Native American Rights Fund, last accessed Aug. 15, 2020, available at <https://www.narf.org/vote-by-mail/>.

¹⁶ "Election Day Registration: SB 72," ACLU of Northern California, last accessed Aug. 15, 2020, available at <https://www.aclunc.org/our-work/legislation/election-day-registration-sb-72>.

¹⁷ Executive Order N-67-20, Executive Department of the State of California, June 3, 2020 available at <https://www.gov.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/6.3.20-EO-N-67-20.docx.pdf>; "ACLU of California Statement on the Governor's Executive Order on the November General Election," ACLU of Northern California, June 3, 2020 Press Release, available at <https://www.aclunc.org/news/aclu-california-statement-governor-s-executive-order-november-general-election>.



COMMENTARY

PAST ELECTORAL REFORMS HAVE PREPARED CALIFORNIA FOR PANDEMIC CHALLENGES

*Senator Ben Allen*¹

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought a plethora of challenges to our society, not the least to our democratic electoral system. The upcoming November 3 General Election will test our ability to protect what is perhaps an American's most basic and fundamental right—the right to vote. Throughout the nation, elections officials are turning to vote-by-mail (VBM) ballots as a safe and convenient alternative to in-person voting, but not without concerns for some jurisdictions' abilities to adjust their systems and adapt their processes. With the logistical challenges associated with systemic change and implementation, mixed with a drumbeat of dangerous and baseless claims about voting and the aftermath of the election from some of the most prominent voices in the land, I am frankly concerned about the election going smoothly in a number of other states. Thankfully, in California, we have more experience with physically distant voting. With the implementation of additional reforms and security measures in recent years – and orders from the Governor requiring elections officials to send a VBM ballot to every registered active voter in every county – the Golden State is far better equipped to deal with the logistical challenges the pandemic poses this season.

Voting by mail has become more popular with each election cycle in California. “No excuse” absentee voting has been available to all voters in the state since 1979.² And while permanent absentee voting – in which voters choose to have a ballot mailed to them automatically in every election – had been available for decades for people who had a documented excuse for not being able to go to the polls, in 2001 the Legislature and Governor expanded the law to permit all voters to request no-excuse permanent absentee voter status.³ A new law in 2008 rebranded absentee voting as vote-by-mail voting to more accurately reflect the availability of the option for every registered voter – not just those who are ill or out of town.⁴

In 2000, nearly 25 percent of ballots cast in the state's general election were mail ballots.⁵ By the 2010 general election, as word spread about universal permanent access to the option, 48 percent of California votes cast were VBM. In 2018, 65 percent of general election ballots cast were mail ballots. The ratio record was broken again in the 2020 statewide primary: 72 percent of ballots cast were VBM

¹ The author is most grateful for the assistance of Shannon Flaherty, Nicole Winger, and especially Jennifer Chase for the preparation of this article.

² Assembly Bill 1699 (Lehman), Chapter 77, Statutes of 1978.

³ Assembly Bill 1520 (Shelley), Chapter 922, Statutes of 2001.

⁴ Assembly Bill 1243 (Karnette), Chapter 508, Statutes of 2007.

⁵ “Historical Vote-By Mail Ballot Use in California,” California Secretary of State, <https://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/historical-absentee/>



ballots. This widespread usage demonstrates that most California voters understand the security of VBM voting and prefer the convenience of marking their ballot at anytime from anywhere in the 29 days leading up to Election Day.

Recognizing these trends and the need for greater flexibility in the voting process, I authored the Voter's Choice Act (VCA) of 2016 along with my colleague, Senator Bob Hertzberg.⁶ To a large extent, the VCA was inspired by the hybrid voting model that has been in place for a number of years in Colorado. Under our law, counties can choose to opt in to the VCA, which requires that all registered voters receive a VBM ballot and switches neighborhood polling places to better-equipped vote centers. Open for several days ahead of the election, these centers allow eligible citizens to vote at any location in the county and offer a variety of services including same-day voter registration and accessible voting machines for people with disabilities. Some vote centers are open for 11 days; a larger number of centers are open for four days. Voters can vote in person at one of the vote centers. Or they can fill out the ballot they receive in the mail and then either mail it in or drop it off at one of the vote centers or at one of the designated drop boxes available all throughout the county. Critically, voters are not restricted to voting at one polling location on one day within a certain time frame. Instead, they are allowed to vote anywhere convenient to them in their county several days before and on Election Day.

Five counties implemented the VCA for the 2018 election cycle and 15 counties implemented it in 2020. Researchers have found the VCA achieved the goal of increasing turnout and providing voters with more flexibility.^{7,8} Overall, turnout increased by four percent for those who prefer in-person voting and one percent for VBM voters.⁷ An analysis of Sacramento and Orange Counties showed most voters tend to mail or deliver ballots at drop boxes at a fairly steady rate over the weeks before the election, while a smaller concentration of voters dropped ballots or voted at vote centers closer to and on Election Day.⁷

While all 58 California counties are very familiar with processing vote-by-mail ballots – and two of the smallest counties have been voting one hundred percent by mail for a long time – the VCA has provided useful insights regarding the administration of large-scale VBM elections.

When COVID-19 hit, California continued its leadership in electoral reform when Governor Gavin Newsom and the state legislature took a series of actions to ensure Californians can exercise their right to vote in a safe and accessible manner amidst the pandemic. On May 8, Governor Newsom signed Executive Order N-64-20 to require county elections officials to mail a VBM ballot to every registered

⁶ Senate Bill 450 (Allen), Chapter 832, Statutes of 2016.

⁷ McGee, E., Paluch, J., and Romero M., “How Greater Vote-by-Mail Influences California Voter Turnout.” *Public Policy Institute of California*. September 2020. <https://www.ppic.org/wp-content/uploads/how-greater-vote-by-mail-influences-california-voter-turnout-september-2020.pdf>

⁸ McGhee, E., Romero, M., Daly, L., and Kousser, T. “How Did the Voter’s Choice Act Affect Turnout in 2018?” *New Electorate Study* May 1, 2019.

https://drive.google.com/file/d/158V4q_5nS8_O6cRw0RkdnHYs_9rvobOh/view



voter.⁹ We took action in the Legislature to codify the order by establishing specific procedures for early and in-person voting that are consistent with public health guidance and requirements.¹⁰

These changes give elections officials critical flexibility while preserving public health and voting access. Consolidated polling locations and vote centers will be open for Election Day and three days prior, and ballots will be mailed out and ballot drop-off locations will be available 30 days prior to Election Day. Counties can choose to increase the number of ballot drop-off locations, the number of vote centers or polling place locations, and the length of time they are open above the minimum standards set by the state law. Throughout Los Angeles County – the most populous in the state, with 4.3 million registered voters – there will be approximately 75 11-day vote centers, 725 five-day vote centers, and more than 400 ballot drop box locations.

Recent polls reinforce that voters are confident in a VBM system, particularly during the pandemic.^{11,12} Californians overwhelmingly support using VBM for the November 3 General Election; amongst the supporters, 52 percent prefer to mail in their ballot and 18 percent plan to use a VBM ballot but deliver it to a vote center or drop box.¹¹

The pandemic certainly exacerbates challenges for elections officials; however, well-established reforms in statutes, processes, equipment, and safety protocols have put California in a stronger place to implement a successful and fair election come November.

⁹ “Governor Newsom Issues Executive Order to Protect Public Health by Mailing Every Registered Voter a Ballot Ahead of the November General Election. Executive Order N-64-20.” May 8, 2020. <https://www.gov.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/05.08.2020-EO-N-64-20-signed.pdf>

¹⁰ Assembly Bill 860 (Berman), Chapter 4, Statutes of 2020; Senate Bill 423 (Umberg), Chapter 31, Statutes of 2020.

¹¹ Kousser, T., Romero, M., Lockhart, M. Hill, S. and Merolla, J. “How do Californians Want to Cast their Ballots During the COVID-19 Crisis?” *New Electorate Study*. May 21, 2020. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/10EmINSJaqKwc48qEKpyxexrGF8R6TnUX/view>

¹² Schickler, E., Mora, G., & Powell, J. A. “Californians confident in mail-in voting despite partisan attacks.” UC Berkeley: Institute of Governmental Studies. August 24, 2020. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1mm8c6v6>



COMMENTARY

PROTECTING THE RIGHT TO VOTE IN CALIFORNIA'S 2020 ELECTION WHILE KEEPING VOTERS, ELECTION WORKERS AND THE PUBLIC SAFE

Assemblymember Marc Berman, Chair, Assembly Committee on Elections & Redistricting

Long before Californians first heard about COVID-19, the 2020 election cycle was already shaping up to be unlike any other in state history. This year is the first presidential election cycle since the implementation of the 2015 California New Motor Voter Act (AB 1461, Gonzalez), which automatically registers eligible citizens to vote when they apply for or renew a driver's license unless they opt out. Thanks in part to that law, more than 84 percent of eligible Californians are registered to vote, the highest percentage since at least 1942.

The 2020 election cycle also marks the first widespread use of the 2016 California Voter's Choice Act (SB 450, Allen) in California elections. First used in five counties in 2018, the California Voter's Choice Act allows counties to conduct elections under a modernized system in which every registered voter is mailed a ballot, expanded early in-person voting opportunities are available, and voters are able to cast a ballot at any vote center within their county. Fifteen counties—including more than half of the state's registered voters—are conducting elections pursuant to the California Voter's Choice Act this year.

When the state held its primary election in March, there were only 43 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the state. As a result, voting in the primary was largely unaffected by the COVID-19 pandemic (though some county elections officials reported that they had a larger number of poll workers than usual who failed to show up on Election Day). Shortly after the primary election was held, however, it became clear that the state would need to make changes to the way we conducted this year's General Election.

As COVID-19 spread throughout the country, at least 16 states either postponed their scheduled primary elections or switched them to vote-by-mail elections due to concerns that conducting in-person voting during the spread of COVID-19 threatens the health and safety of voters, election workers, and the public generally. When Wisconsin held its statewide primary election as scheduled in April, it saw a spike in applications for absentee ballots that elections officials struggled to process. Thousands of voters who requested absentee ballots ultimately did not receive them in time. Furthermore, due to COVID-19 related concerns, Wisconsin elections officials were forced to significantly reduce the number of polling locations available; in Milwaukee, the number of polling locations was reduced by more than 97 percent. As a result, the millions of Wisconsin voters who did not receive an absentee ballot were forced to risk their health—and possibly their lives—by waiting in long lines during the middle of a pandemic if they wanted to cast a ballot.



It quickly became clear that the increased use of vote-by-mail ballots was essential to protecting Californians' health and safety while ensuring voters' access to elections conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Fortunately, California's recent elections reforms—which were designed to modernize the way we conduct elections and make our democracy more inclusive and representative of the state's diverse population—made the state better prepared to conduct an election during a pandemic.

Due in part to the implementation of the California Voter's Choice Act, approximately 78 percent of registered California voters received a mail ballot in the primary election. Furthermore, in late April, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors voted to begin sending vote-by-mail ballots to all registered active voters for all future elections, starting with the November 2020 General Election. As a result, more than 87 percent of California's registered voters were set to receive a ballot in the mail for this November's election even before the state took action to change how that election would be conducted in response to the pandemic.

Given the anticipated increase in demand for voting by mail, and the already substantial use of mail ballots in the state, it made sense to take further steps to facilitate voting by mail. That's why, two days after the debacle of Wisconsin's primary election, I announced legislation to require that every registered California voter be mailed a ballot for this November's election. That legislation—which was signed into law by Governor Newsom in June—also made additional accommodations in state law to facilitate mail voting. Those accommodations include extending the deadline for county elections officials to receive ballots that are postmarked by Election Day and allowing every California voter to sign up at <https://wheresmyballot.sos.ca.gov/> to track and receive notifications on the status of their vote by mail ballot.

While mailing every active registered voter a ballot is an essential part of conducting a successful presidential election during a pandemic, it doesn't eliminate the need for in-person voting. Millions of Californians will need a safe in-person voting location because they lost or damaged their ballot, need language or voting assistance, or need to register to vote. At the same time, the need to provide for social and physical distancing means that many traditional polling sites aren't appropriate for use as in-person voting locations this November. That's why I also jointly authored legislation to give counties flexibility to reduce the total number of in-person voting locations that are open on Election Day in exchange for providing at least three days of early in-person voting and a minimum number of vote-by-mail ballot drop-off locations beginning a month before the election. These changes will help "flatten the curve" of voting, and hopefully will minimize the number of people who need to gather at voting locations on Election Day in order to exercise their right to vote.

The challenges of holding a major election in the middle of a global pandemic are immense. I'm proud that state legislators, local elections officials, and representatives from community organizations came together on policies that will protect Californians' right to vote while keeping voters, election workers, and the public safe.



COMMENTARY

ELECTION LAW CHANGES AS A RESULT OF COVID-19

*Senator Tom Umberg, Chair, Senate Committee on Elections and Constitutional Amendments
Jonathan Rivera Diaz, UC Hastings Legal Extern*

As the chair of Senate Committee on Elections and Constitutional Amendments, 2020 brought unique challenges to our committee's work. COVID-19 upended the legislature's process and dramatically altered our priorities for the remainder of the 2019-20 legislative session. California held its Primary Election on March 3, 2020. At the time, there were very few confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the state. Unfortunately, COVID-19 was not contained, the positivity rate spiked, and California needed to modify how the state conducts its elections to confront the ongoing challenges of the pandemic. This resulted in a collaborative legislative effort with Assemblymember Marc Berman, Chair of the Assembly Committee on Elections and Redistricting, aimed at mitigating the effects of COVID-19 on California's November General Election.¹ This included ways to provide greater access through voting by mail while maintaining sensible and safe in-person voting options. Legislation also addressed the long-term effects of COVID-19 on census and redistricting deadlines.²

Assembly Bill 860 (Berman)

California voters have gradually shifted from voting in-person to voting by mail. This is a result of a number of changes over the past two decades aimed at expanding voter accessibility. One recent and notable change, SB 450, permitted counties to shift from a traditional polling place model to a vote center model.³ Among the many changes permitted by SB 450, the bill required counties that moved to a vote center model to mail a ballot to every active registered voter. (The county of Los Angeles was exempted from this requirement, but this spring its Board of Supervisors voted to adopt this practice.) With this change, and combined with the number of voters who permanently receive a vote-by-mail ballot for every election as well as voters who reside in an all vote-by-mail county, the March 2020 Primary Election saw 72.1 percent, or 6,982,750 ballots, cast by mail.⁴ To compare, the June 2016 primary saw 58.9 percent, or 5,036,262, of ballots cast by mail.⁵

¹ SB 423 (Umberg, Chapter 31, Statutes of 2020) and AB 860 (Berman, Chapter 4, Statutes of 2020)

² SB 970 (Umberg, Chapter 111, Statutes of 2020)

³ SB 450 (Allen, Chapter 832, Statutes of 2016)

⁴ Voter Participation Statistics for March 3, 2020 Presidential Primary Election by California Secretary of State (<https://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/historical-absentee>)

⁵ Voter Participation Statistics for June 7, 2016 Presidential Primary Election by California Secretary of State (<https://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/historical-absentee>)



Shortly after the March 2020 Primary Election, Governor Newsom and local governments declared states of emergency and took steps to reduce the spread of COVID-19. County election officials needed to reevaluate and update their plans for the November General Election. The Secretary of State established a working group to discuss the conduct of elections during the COVID-19 pandemic. On May 8, 2020, Governor Newsom issued Executive Order N-64-20, which required each county's elections official to send vote-by-mail ballots for the November 3, 2020 General Election to all registered voters.⁶ AB 860 used the framework from the Executive Order and addressed the procedures for the vote-by-mail portion of the November general election. AB 860 required county election officials to begin mailing ballots on the 29th day before the election, allowed counties to begin processing returned vote-by-mail ballots earlier, and extended the deadline for receipt of vote-by-mail ballots. With Californians already trending towards voting by mail, and with the effects of the pandemic, sending every active registered voter a ballot by mail ensures that voters are safe and are not disenfranchised because of concerns relating to COVID-19.

Senate Bill 423 (Umberg)

However, not all individuals will vote by mail due to a variety of reasons. In-person voting locations are necessary for homeless or unhoused voters, Californians who require language assistance, use of disabled-accessible voting equipment, replacing lost or damaged ballots, or for voters registering or updating their voter registration. That is why changes were made to address the in-person voting aspect for the November General Election. On June 3, 2020, Governor Newsom issued Executive Order N-67-20 and established a minimum level of in-person voting opportunities that must be available for the November General Election.⁷

SB 423 expanded on the Governor's executive order and permitted counties to administer the November General Election as they normally would or alternatively opt for a minimum of one vote center or consolidated polling place for every 10,000 registered voters. The consolidated polling places are required to be open for at least three days prior to and including Election Day. Counties that consolidate their polling locations must provide at least two ballot drop-off locations or at least one ballot drop-off for every 15,000 registered voters, whichever is more. Each county and the Secretary of State are also required to conduct a voter education and outreach campaign in their jurisdiction or statewide to bring awareness to these changes in the voting procedure. With funding allocated in the 2020-21 state budget for the administration and outreach support, SB 423 will ensure that voters who decide to vote in person are safe and with a reduced risk to COVID-19.

Senate Bill 970 (Umberg)

While AB 860 and SB 423 address the November General Election, SB 970 changes the date of the direct primary in gubernatorial election years (i.e. even-numbered years not evenly divisible by four)

⁶ Executive Order N-64-20

⁷ Executive Order N-67-20



from March to June. Because of COVID-19, on April 13, 2020, the United States Census Bureau sought relief from Congress to provide 120 additional calendar days to deliver the first apportionment counts. This delay means that the date on which redistricting data are sent to the states would be moved to July 31, 2021, providing redistricting bodies and local jurisdictions with a nearly impossible timeframe to adjust state and local district lines.

The timeline that was in place at the start of the 2020 year is as follows: The California Redistricting Commission would have until August 12, 2021 to release the final district maps for the House of Representatives, the Board of Equalization, the State Senate, and the State Assembly. Meanwhile, local jurisdictions, such as counties and municipalities, have deadlines of 151 days before the next regular election occurring after March 1, 2022. Special districts have until 180 days before the next regular election occurring after March 1, 2022. Counties and municipalities would have until October 8, 2021 and special districts would have until September 9, 2021 to finalize their maps.

While this was the timeframe when the bill was moving through the legislative process, the California Supreme Court granted emergency relief to the Legislature. The California Supreme Court granted the Legislature a peremptory writ of mandate allowing the California Redistricting Commission to certify the final statewide maps no later than December 15, 2021.⁸ Additionally, AB 1276 by Assemblymember Bonta altered the deadlines for local jurisdictions.⁹ Moving the primary from March to June provides additional time to finalize district maps.

Conclusion

Though COVID-19 has upended California's election process, the work of the legislature with the governor will ensure that California's November General Election runs smoothly and is safe for all individuals who participate, regardless of the manner in which they choose to participate.

⁸ Legislature of the State of California v. Padilla, S262530, July 17, 2020.

⁹ AB 1276 (Bonta, Chapter 90, Statutes of 2020)



RESEARCH

HOW CAN WE INCREASE TURNOUT AMONG LOW PROPENSITY VOTERS?

Seth Hill (UC San Diego)

Thad Kousser (UC San Diego)

Gabriel Lenz (UC Berkeley)

Mackenzie Lockhart (UC San Diego)

Elizabeth Mitchell (UC Berkeley)

Abstract. How can we increase voter turnout among low-propensity voters? Researchers and practitioners have found interventions that increase voter turnout, but these interventions tend to increase turnout among individuals already likely to vote, and therefore appear to exacerbate existing inequalities in participation. This project developed and tested an intervention designed to encourage people with a lower prior likelihood of voting into the electorate. First, in summer 2018, we surveyed a diverse sample of voting and non-voting Californians about their political attitudes. We concluded that feeling inadequately informed and feeling inefficacious may contribute to low turnout rates. Based on the results of the survey, we designed messages to address these feelings and tested them in an experiment to increase turnout in two special elections in June 2019 by targeting these sentiments among people with infrequent prior turnout records. Letters with information and encouragement about the voting process did not increase turnout in the subsequent election. We conclude that further work is needed to identify interventions that successfully increase turnout among low-propensity voters.



Introduction

Understanding voter turnout is a longstanding goal of political science research. Foundational work highlights the role of resources: people are more likely to vote when they have the time, money, and civic skills they need to engage with politics (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995). More recently, as political scientists have turned to experimental methods to study turnout, interest has shifted to psychological factors. Researchers and practitioners have found interventions that increase voter turnout by increasing social pressure to vote (Gerber, Green, and Larimer 2008) and by reminding voters of the closeness of an election or their civic duty to participate (Gerber and Green 2000).

Though these interventions successfully increase voter turnout, they increase turnout most among individuals already likely to vote, and therefore appear to exacerbate existing inequalities in participation (Enos, Fowler, and Vavreck 2014). How can we increase voter turnout among low-propensity voters? To answer this question, we first fielded a survey asking a sample of Californians to rate the importance of a variety of factors in people's decision to abstain from voting. We asked respondents about logistical hurdles to voting, which could be overcome with traditional resource-based explanations of turnout, as well as psychological deterrents like a lack of social pressure. Finally, based on work on political efficacy (Verba and Almond 1963; Finkel 1985), we suspected that people may not vote because they do not believe voting can produce outcomes they desire. We therefore included questions related to the importance of internal and external political efficacy.

Based on the results of the survey, we fielded an experiment designed to increase turnout among low-propensity voters. A special election in June 2019 provided the opportunity to test messages targeting logistical and psychological determinants of voting. Elections took place in two California State Senate Districts: a Southern California district within Los Angeles County with lower past turnout, and a rural Northern California district with higher past turnout. The Northern California district contained a mixture of counties that had and had not implemented the Voter's Choice Act, a suite of reforms intended to make voting more convenient. We were therefore able to test messages on populations with different historic turnout records and different logistical barriers to voting.

Survey

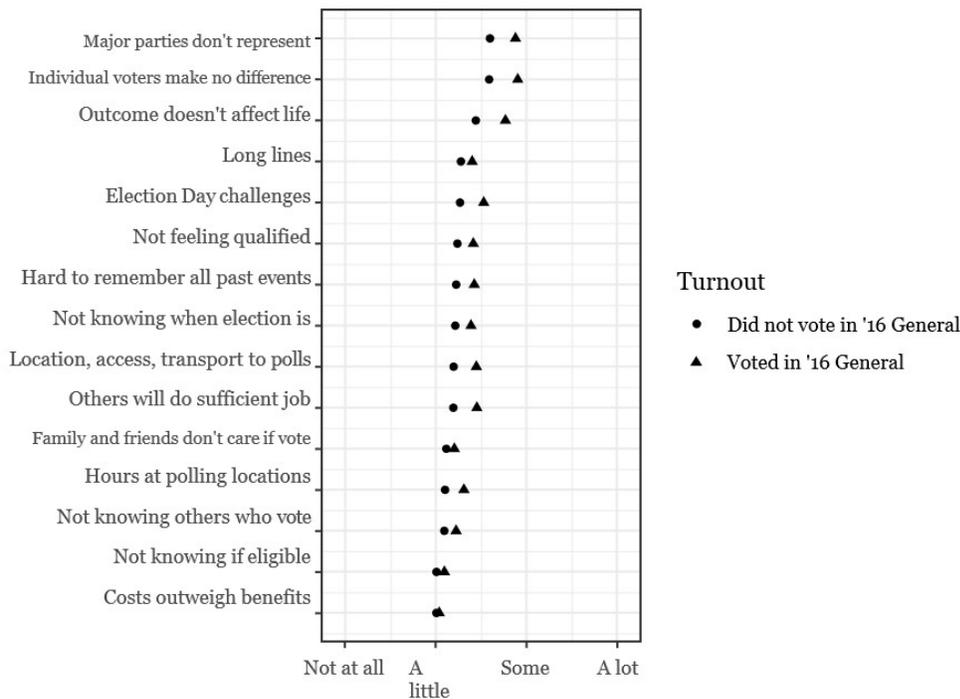
To gain insight into the explanations citizens offer for not turning out to vote, we fielded a survey of Californians in the late summer and early fall of 2018. Respondents were recruited through Lucid. The survey yielded 11,053 responses from citizens, 83% of whom reported being registered to vote. All respondents were asked a series of questions designed to capture, directly and indirectly, some features that might lead an eligible person to abstain from voting.

Our sample frame is the citizen voting age population of California, based on the characteristics of that frame reported in the 2016 American Community Survey. So that our sample of respondents would reflect this larger population, we sampled to meet targets of respondents matching the distributions of key demographic characteristics of voting age citizens: gender, age, education levels, race, ethnicity, and region. We created survey weights based on those targets, using gender on its own, the joint distribution of age by education (our categories for the ages of respondents are 18-24, 25-44, 45-64, and 65 and older, and for education they are high school or less, some college, Bachelor's, or graduate degree) and the joint distribution of race by ethnicity (our categories for race are White, Black, Asian, and Other, and our

categories for ethnicity are Hispanic or Not Hispanic). All of our reported results incorporate these weights.

We first presented respondents with a list of potential reasons for abstention and asked them to rate “how much you think each keeps **people like you** from turning out to vote in **national and statewide general elections.**” The average importance of each reason is presented in Figure 1, separated into respondents who did and did not vote in the 2016 Presidential election. Voters and nonvoters’ ratings of the importance of the available reasons were similar. For voters and nonvoters alike, the three reasons rated as most influential were that major parties don’t represent them, that individual voters make no difference, and that the outcome of the election does not have a big effect on their life. These responses suggest a lack of external efficacy (Lane 1959)—many citizens seem to think that voting in an election will not produce outcomes they desire.

Further evidence of a lack of external efficacy comes from an open-ended follow-up question. After rating the impact of the reasons listed in figure 1, respondents were asked whether there were “other reasons you believe keep people like you from turning out to vote in national and statewide elections.” Around 3,800 respondents



How much does this keep people like you from voting?

Figure 1: Reasons why someone might not turn out to vote.

provided some answer to this question; these responses were coded into nine non-mutually-exclusive categories. The results can be found in Figure 2. Two of the most common types of responses involved a lack of efficacy: the sense that votes don't actually matter to election outcomes, and a lack of caring about elections themselves. The former category includes general references to one's vote not counting, as well as a number of references to elections being fixed, rigged, or tampered with. In the latter category, respondents mentioned not caring who gets elected and a general sense of apathy about politics. A related and common category involved the quality of options in elections—around 10% of responses mentioned that they don't have any good options in elections, or that all politicians are corrupt or incompetent.

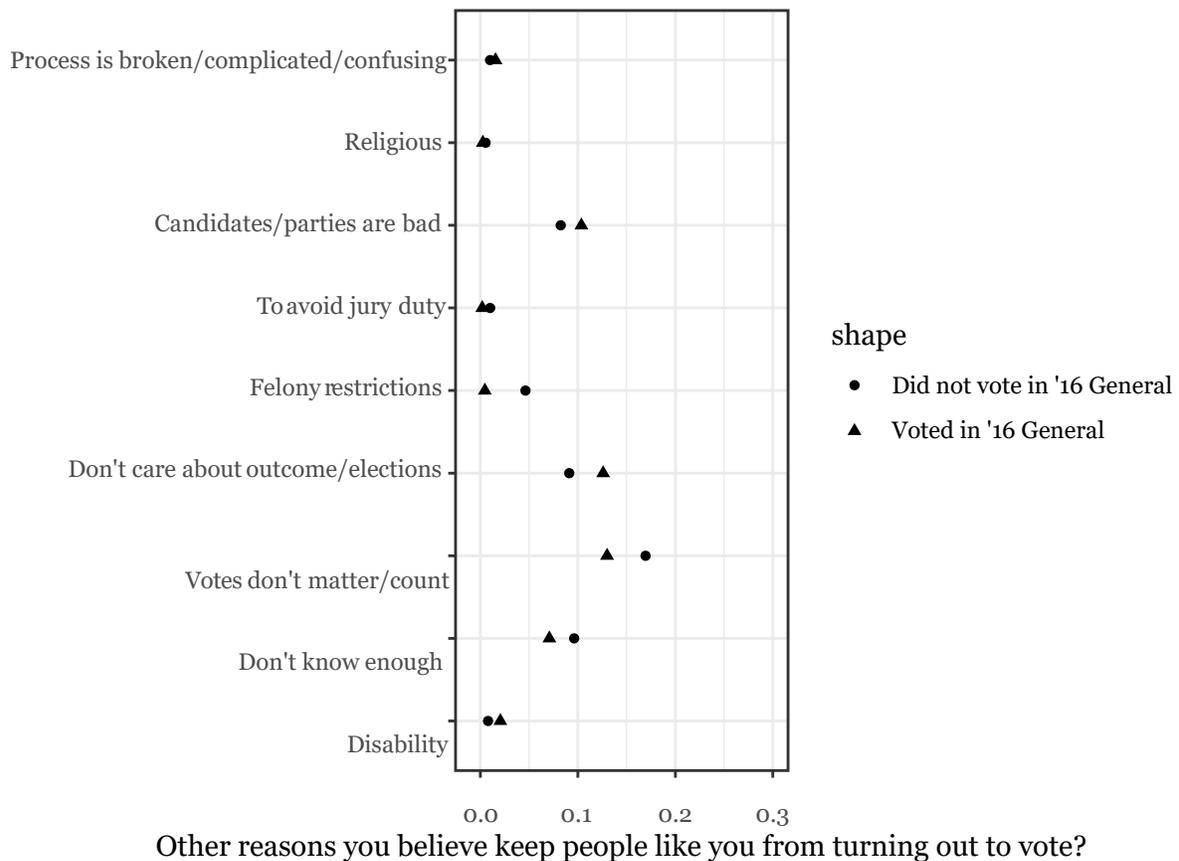


Figure 2: Proportion of respondents giving any additional reason why people don't vote whose responses fell into the listed categories. Categories are not mutually exclusive.

Many respondents also referenced a lack of internal efficacy (Balch 1974; Niemi, Craig, and Mattei 1991) as a reason why people do not vote in both the open- and closed-ended questions. In the closed-ended question displayed in Figure 1, many respondents agreed that “not feeling qualified” was a common reason not to vote, and 8% of responses in the open-ended follow-up question mentioned people not knowing enough to vote. Other questions in the survey support the idea that feeling unqualified is an obstacle to voting. For example, almost half of respondents disagreed with the statement that “the average person has enough information about local government to participate in elections.”



Although nonvoters rate external and internal efficacy as reasons why people like them don't vote, Figure 1 shows that voters generally rate these as greater obstacles than nonvoters. This pattern suggests that voters and nonvoters are simply reporting widely-shared reasons for nonvoting, reasons they may have seen or heard in the media, and not the actual reasons they are not voting. Indeed, research has long since shown that people cannot accurately report on the reasons for their behaviors and instead tend to report popular explanations for their behaviors (Nisbett and Wilson 1977). Voters may be more exposed to the media than nonvoters and so may endorse these explanations at higher rates than nonvoters.

In the open-ended responses, however, nonvoters are more likely than voters to say that "votes don't matter" or "don't count." They are also more likely to mention "not knowing enough." We also find that people who say the average person does not have enough information about local government to participate in elections are less likely to vote. Among those who said this, 41% did not vote in 2016, compared to 24% of those who said otherwise. These differences in internal efficacy between voters and nonvoters remain highly significant when included in regression models with demographic controls.

Non-voting respondents also scored lower on political knowledge items in the survey than voting respondents did: those who did not know that the next Congressional election was in the month of November were 24 percentage points less likely to vote than those who did. Respondents who were able to name both major political parties were 26 percentage points more likely to vote than those who could not, and those who knew that the Republicans are the more conservative party were 31 points more likely to have voted than those who did not. These differences also persist when included in regression models with controls for a variety of demographic variables.

Taken together, the survey responses suggest that internal and external efficacy play a key role in how people explain the decision not to vote. These responses do not necessarily reflect the causal processes leading to our respondents' turnout; we must use caution in interpreting the accounts people provide for the causes of their behavior (Nisbett and Wilson 1977), and other forces not highlighted here, like logistical hurdles and social pressure, are important drivers of voting. However, the ways in which people, especially nonvoters, explain their decisions serve as a starting point for the design of interventions that increase the likelihood of voting.

Field Experiment

Based on the results of the survey, we designed an intervention to increase turnout among low-propensity voters in two June 2019 special elections for seats in the California State Senate. We collaborated with the non-partisan government reform group California Common Cause to deliver this intervention. The intervention took the form of letters (shown in the Appendix) mailed to registered voters who had missed voting in at least one of the previous five major elections. We randomly sent these voters one of four different messages encouraging them to vote. In addition to treatments targeting the efficacy-related feelings suggested by the survey, the intervention tested the effects of information about a new policy, the Voter's Choice Act (VCA), that sought to make voting more convenient.

The study population consisted of all voters registered in the two California State Senate Districts holding special elections (Districts 1 & 33) who had missed voting in at least one of the previous five major elections. This amounted to a total of 793,215 eligible participants. Of these, 253,788 participants were assigned to receive a treatment or placebo treatment letter; the remainder of the eligible participants served as a control group.

The first message was a “Smaller Districts” treatment and targeted external efficacy. It encouraged recipients to think that their vote could make a difference in the upcoming elections due to the smaller districts and subnational focus of State Senators. A second message, the “Wisdom of the Crowds” treatment, targeted internal efficacy by telling recipients that elections can turn small amounts of knowledge from many people into a better outcome for everyone. A third message, the “Party Information” treatment, informed voters about differences between the Democratic and Republican parties by including small excerpts from the state parties’ platforms. Finally, the “VCA Information” treatment informed the recipient of changes in the voting process following California’s Voter’s Choice Act, including the implementation of vote centers and the expansion of early voting. We sent some additional voters a “placebo” message that simply informed them of the upcoming election and encouraged them to vote. The Appendix shows the wording of the letters. We timed the letters so that respondents received them about five days before election day (which we confirmed by mailing letters to two of the authors).

In assigning participants to treatment conditions, we divided participants into blocks based on district, birth year, and level of turnout in prior elections. Participants were eligible for different treatment conditions depending on their county and State Senate District of residence. In all, 70,270 participants received the placebo treatment letter, 43,010 received the VCA Information treatment, 53,544 received each of the Wisdom of the Crowds and Smaller Districts treatment, and 33,419 received the Party Information treatment.

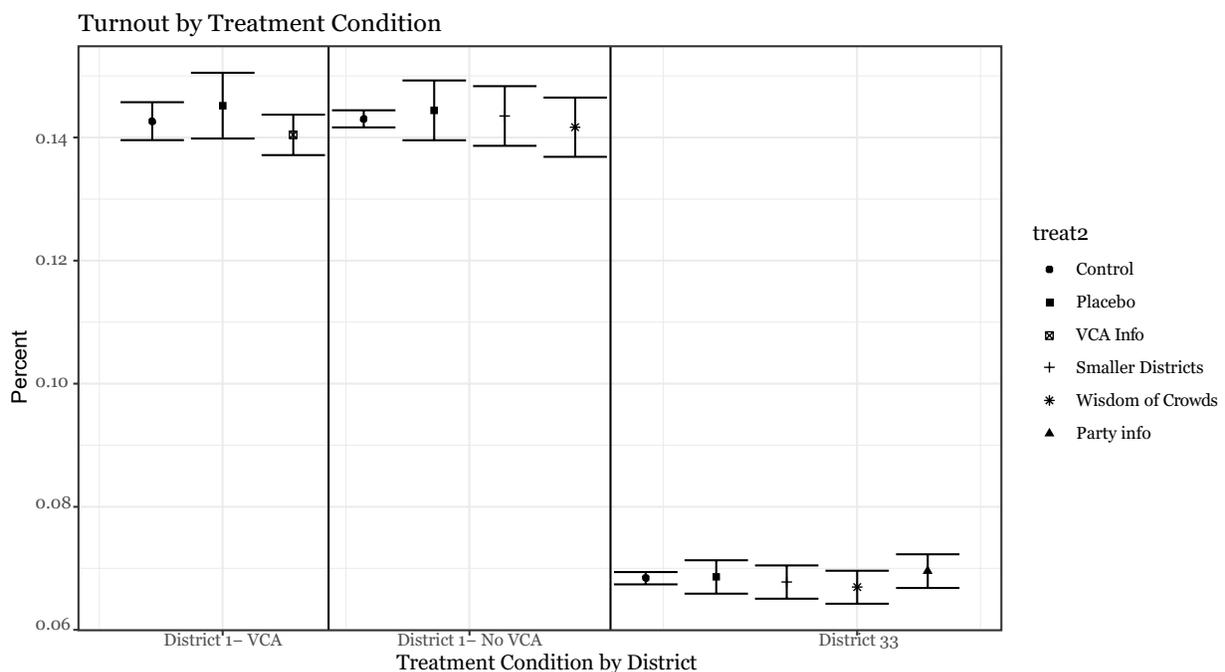




Figure 3: Turnout by District and Treatment Condition. The figure shows the treatment effect estimates in District 1 (rural) and District 33 (LA County). Voter's Choice Act (VCA) was only implemented in two counties in District 1, so the figure shows separately the District 1 results for these two counties and for the remaining Non-VCA counties. VCA was not implemented in District 33. In all three districts, the figure shows that the treatments did not increase turnout noticeably from the control condition. It also shows much higher rates of turnout in the more rural District 1 than the urban District 33.

Figure 3 presents the experimental results, showing the level of turnout in each district and treatment condition. It shows the District 1 results separately for the two counties that implemented VCA and the remaining counties that did not. The figure suggests that the treatment conditions did not differ significantly from one another in their turnout rates, nor from the placebo treatment. In every case, voters turned out at slightly higher rates in the placebo condition relative to the control condition, though the differences are not statistically significant. The condition in which we informed participants about the party platforms had higher turnout than the other conditions, but again the differences are substantively small and not statistically significant at conventional levels.

To confirm these findings, we pooled all treatments and analyzed the results using OLS regressions of turnout on an indicator for receiving any of the treatment letters. Table 1 shows these estimates. The simplest specification includes only State Senate District controls; the three further specifications add controls for prior turnout, gender, party, and randomization block.¹ The final model applies the fourth specification to especially low-propensity voters, defined as those who had voted in half or fewer of the previous five major elections.

Across the four specifications, the coefficients on the treatment indicator are small and precisely estimated. Results are substantively similar when analyses are repeated for each individual treatment condition within each district: though coefficients differ slightly in sign and magnitude across specifications, no treatment has a robust effect on turnout in either direction. We therefore cannot conclude that any treatment had an effect on turnout.



Conclusion

This article investigated how we can increase turnout among low propensity voters. We first presented exploratory results from a survey of California voters and nonvoters. In the survey, many respondents suggested that people do not vote because they are not adequately informed and do not feel that elections will produce the outcomes they desire. In responses to open-ended questions, nonvoters were more likely to mention these reasons than were voters, a pattern that held up with standard control variables. Additionally, lack of knowledge about basic political facts, such as being able to name the two major parties in the US, strongly predicted turnout.

Dependent variable: Turnout in 2019 Special Election

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Treatment	-0.0002 (0.001)	-0.0001 (0.001)	-0.0003 (0.001)	-0.0004 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)
Observations	738,529	738,524	738,524	738,524	476,133
R ²	0.015	0.086	0.124	0.124	.036
Adjusted R ²	0.015	0.086	0.124	0.124	.035
District control	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Turnout control		✓	✓	✓	✓
Turnout x treatment		✓	✓	✓	✓
Block fixed effects			✓	✓	✓
Gender & party control			✓	✓	✓
Gender and party x treatment				✓	✓
Low turnout only					✓

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 1: Results of regressions of turnout in the 2019 special election on treatment conditions and control variables. All treatments are pooled together with the placebo condition. All models contain District 33 and District 1 counties pooled together, excluding the 2 counties implementing the VCA. Model 5 estimates are only from those who had voted in less than half of the previous five major elections for which they were eligible. *Models 2, 3, and 4 were registered prior to analysis.

We drew on these survey results to develop messages targeting feelings of inadequacy and inefficacy. A field experiment testing these messages yielded precisely-estimated null effects: our intervention did not increase turnout among low-propensity voters. Though our survey demonstrates that many nonvoters justify their abstention with references to political efficacy, the results of our intervention suggest that messages targeting feelings of efficacy were not effective. Of all the treatments, the letter informing respondents about the platforms of the two parties showed the most promise, but this result could have arisen by chance. Nevertheless, helping voters learn what they need to know to feel confident enough to vote may be worth pursuing in follow up studies. Further work is needed to develop interventions that successfully encourage low-propensity voters into the electorate.

¹Specifications 2-4 were preregistered here. We include covariate interactions with treatment (Lin 2013). We centered the control variables so that they have mean zero, including indicator variables. As a result, we can interpret the estimates as the average treatment effect even when we include treatment interactions with covariates.



References

- Balch, George I. 1974. "Multiple Indicators in Survey Research: The Concept "Sense of Political Efficacy"." *Political Methodology*, 1–43.
- Brady, Henry E, Sidney Verba, and Kay Lehman Schlozman. 1995. "Beyond SES: A resource model of political participation." *American Political Science Review* 89 (2): 271–94.
- Enos, Ryan D., Anthony Fowler, and Lynn Vavreck. 2014. "Increasing Inequality: The Effect of Govt Mobilization on the Composition of the Electorate." *The Journal of Politics* 76 (1): 273–88.
- Finkel, Steven E. 1985. "Reciprocal effects of participation and political efficacy: A panel analysis." *American Journal of Political Science*, 891–913.
- Gerber, Alan S., Donald P. Green, and Christopher W Larimer. 2008. "Social Pressure and Voter Turnout: Evidence from a Large-Scale Field Experiment." *American Political Science Review*, 33–48.
- Gerber, A. S., and D. P. Green. 2000. "The Effects of Canvassing, Telephone Calls, and Direct Mail on Voter Turnout: A Field Experiment." *American Political Science Review* 94 (September): 653–63.
- Lane, Robert E. 1959. *Political Life: Why People Get Involved in Politics*. The Free Press of Glencoe.
- Lin, Winston. 2013. "Agnostic Notes on Regression Adjustments to Experimental Data: Reexamining Freedman's Critique." *The Annals of Applied Statistics* 7 (1): 295–318.
- Niemi, Richard G., Stephen C. Craig, and Franco Mattei. 1991. "Measuring Internal Political Efficacy in the 1988 National Election Study." *American Political Science Review* 85 (4): 1407–13.
- Nisbett, Richard E., and Timothy D. Wilson. 1977. "Telling More Than We Can Know: Verbal Reports on Mental Processes." *Psychological Review* 84 (3): 231–59.
- Verba, Sidney, and Gabriel Almond. 1963. *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.



Appendix with Treatment Letters

Small Districts

(header)

YONNY NUNEZ
6402 MIRAMONTE
BLVD LOS ANGELES,
CA 90001

Dear Registered Voter,

You are currently a registered voter in the State of California. *This letter is to remind you that a Election for California State Senate District 1 will be held on Tuesday, June 4, 2019.* Polls will be open from 7 AM to 8 PM on Election Day. Don't forget to vote!

National politicians can sometimes seem like they don't represent you. State politics, however, is different. **California state senators have smaller districts than national senators, so it's easier for you to make your voice heard.** State politicians, like the ones you can vote for in the June 4 election, need to listen to people in their district, no matter what's going on in national politics.

Please vote on June 4!

If you have any questions about the voting process, please visit the official Secretary of State website (<https://www.sos.ca.gov/>) or call your County Registrar of Voters. We hope you will vote in the upcoming June election!

Sincerely,

(signature)

e)

Rey López-Calderón, Executive Director California Common Cause



Wisdom of Crowds

[D33_W]

(header)

YONNY NUNEZ
6402 MIRAMONTE
BLVD LOS ANGELES,
CA 90001

Dear Registered Voter,

You are currently a registered voter in the State of California. *This letter is to remind you that a Election for California State Senate District 33 will be held on Tuesday, June 4, 2019.* Polls will be open from 7 AM to 8 PM on Election Day. Don't forget to vote!

One purpose of elections is to take the experiences of millions of voters and put them together. By voting in the upcoming election, you can help your district make its choice. Even if each individual voter knows only a little, adding all that knowledge together can help make choices that represent everybody. Have you heard about the “wisdom of the crowds”?

Be part of it! Do your part and vote. Please vote on June 4!

If you have any questions about the voting process, please visit the official Secretary of State website (<https://www.sos.ca.gov/>) or call your County Registrar of Voters. We hope you will vote in the upcoming June election!

Sincerely,

(signature)

Rey López-Calderón, Executive Director California Common Cause



Party Platforms

[D33_PP1]
(header)

YONNY NUNEZ
6402 MIRAMONTE
BLVD LOS ANGELES,
CA 90001

Dear Registered Voter,

You are currently a registered voter in the State of California. *This letter is to remind you that a Primary Election for California State Senate District 33 will be held on Tuesday, June 4, 2019.* Polls will be open from 7 AM to 8 PM on Election Day. Don't forget to vote!

Many people feel like they don't know enough about politics to vote. **But if you have a sense for what the parties stand for, you actually know more than many people!** Here are statements from each of the California state parties' platforms for office.

- The California **Democratic Party** supports “excellence in education from pre-school through college; universal, affordable health care; gun violence prevention; protecting California’s natural resources, air, and water through the use of renewable sources of energy; and continually developing innovative measures to counter global warming and pollution.”
- The California **Republican Party** supports “a vibrant, prosperous and safe California defined by a robust and growing world-class economy, strong and healthy families, and reformed and responsive state and local governments that serve all people while protecting individual liberty.”

One purpose of elections is to take the experiences of millions of voters and put them together. By voting in the upcoming election, you can help your district make a better choice. Even if each individual voter knows only a little, adding all that knowledge together can help make choices that represent everybody.

Be part of it! Do your part and vote. Please vote on June 4!

If you have any questions about the voting process, please visit the official Secretary of State website (<https://www.sos.ca.gov/>) or call your County Registrar of Voters. We hope you will vote in the upcoming June election!

Sincerely,

(signature)

Rey López-Calderón, Executive Director California Common Cause



Party Platforms (reversed order)

(header)

YONNY NUNEZ
6402 MIRAMONTE
BLVD LOS ANGELES,
CA 90001

Dear Registered Voter,

You are currently a registered voter in the State of California. *This letter is to remind you that a Primary Election for California State Senate District 33 will be held on Tuesday, June 4, 2019.* Polls will be open from 7 AM to 8 PM on Election Day. Don't forget to vote!

Many people feel like they don't know enough about politics to vote. **But if you have a sense for what the parties stand for, you actually know more than many people!** Here are statements from each of the California state parties' platforms for office.

- The California **Republican Party** supports “a vibrant, prosperous and safe California defined by a robust and growing world-class economy, strong and healthy families, and reformed and responsive state and local governments that serve all people while protecting individual liberty.”
- The California **Democratic Party** supports “excellence in education from pre-school through college; universal, affordable health care; gun violence prevention; protecting California's natural resources, air, and water through the use of renewable sources of energy; and continually developing innovative measures to counter global warming and pollution.”

One purpose of elections is to take the experiences of millions of voters and put them together. By voting in the upcoming election, you can help your district make a better choice. Even if each individual voter knows only a little, adding all that knowledge together can help make choices that represent everybody.

Be part of it! Do your part and vote. Please vote on June 4!

If you have any questions about the voting process, please visit the official Secretary of State website (<https://www.sos.ca.gov/>) or call your County Registrar of Voters. We hope you will vote in the upcoming June election!

Sincerely,

(signature)

Rey López-Calderón, Executive Director California Common Cause



Placebo

[D1_P]
(header)

YONNY NUNEZ
6402 MIRAMONTE
BLVD LOS ANGELES,
CA 90001

Dear Registered Voter,

You are currently a registered voter in the State of California. *This letter is to remind you that a Election for California State Senate District 1 will be held on Tuesday, June 4, 2019.* Polls will be open from 7 AM to 8 PM on Election Day. Don't forget to vote!

Please vote on June 4!

If you have any questions about the voting process, please visit the official Secretary of State website (<https://www.sos.ca.gov/>) or call your County Registrar of Voters. We hope you will vote in the upcoming June election!

Sincerely,

(signature)

Rey López-Calderón, Executive Director California Common Cause



VCA

[D1VCA_1]
(header)

YONNY NUNEZ
6402 MIRAMONTE
BLVD LOS ANGELES,
CA 90001

Dear Registered Voter,

You are currently a registered voter in the State of California. *This letter is to remind you that a Election for California State Senate District 1 will be held on Tuesday, June 4, 2019.* Polls will be open from 7 AM to 8 PM on Election Day. Don't forget to vote!

Our elected officials want to ensure that every eligible Californian has the opportunity to vote. State officials created the "Voter's Choice Act" in order to modernize elections in California. The Act allows counties to conduct elections under a new model which provides greater flexibility and convenience.

This new election model allows voters to choose how, when, and where to cast their ballot by:

- Mailing every voter a ballot
- Expanding in-person early voting
- Allowing voters to cast a ballot at any vote center within their county

Sacramento County has adopted the Voter's Choice model. You will receive a ballot in the mail and for more information about other voting options, you can go to <http://www.elections.saccounty.net/VoteCenters/Pages/Vote-Center.aspx>

Please vote on or before June 4!

If you have any questions about the voting process, please visit the official Secretary of State website (<https://www.sos.ca.gov/>) or call your County Registrar of Voters. We hope you will vote in the upcoming June election!

Sincerely,

(signature)

Rey López-Calderón, Executive Director California Common Cause



RESEARCH

HOW CAN WE INCREASE TURNOUT AMONG LOW PROPENSITY VOTERS?

Seth Hill (UC San Diego)

Thad Kousser (UC San Diego)

Gabriel Lenz (UC Berkeley)

Mackenzie Lockhart (UC San Diego)

Elizabeth Mitchell (UC Berkeley)

Abstract. How can we increase voter turnout among low-propensity voters? Researchers and practitioners have found interventions that increase voter turnout, but these interventions tend to increase turnout among individuals already likely to vote, and therefore appear to exacerbate existing inequalities in participation. This project developed and tested an intervention designed to encourage people with a lower prior likelihood of voting into the electorate. First, in summer 2018, we surveyed a diverse sample of voting and non-voting Californians about their political attitudes. We concluded that feeling inadequately informed and feeling inefficacious may contribute to low turnout rates. Based on the results of the survey, we designed messages to address these feelings and tested them in an experiment to increase turnout in two special elections in June 2019 by targeting these sentiments among people with infrequent prior turnout records. Letters with information and encouragement about the voting process did not increase turnout in the subsequent election. We conclude that further work is needed to identify interventions that successfully increase turnout among low-propensity voters.



Introduction

Understanding voter turnout is a longstanding goal of political science research. Foundational work highlights the role of resources: people are more likely to vote when they have the time, money, and civic skills they need to engage with politics (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995). More recently, as political scientists have turned to experimental methods to study turnout, interest has shifted to psychological factors. Researchers and practitioners have found interventions that increase voter turnout by increasing social pressure to vote (Gerber, Green, and Larimer 2008) and by reminding voters of the closeness of an election or their civic duty to participate (Gerber and Green 2000).

Though these interventions successfully increase voter turnout, they increase turnout most among individuals already likely to vote, and therefore appear to exacerbate existing inequalities in participation (Enos, Fowler, and Vavreck 2014). How can we increase voter turnout among low-propensity voters? To answer this question, we first fielded a survey asking a sample of Californians to rate the importance of a variety of factors in people's decision to abstain from voting. We asked respondents about logistical hurdles to voting, which could be overcome with traditional resource-based explanations of turnout, as well as psychological deterrents like a lack of social pressure. Finally, based on work on political efficacy (Verba and Almond 1963; Finkel 1985), we suspected that people may not vote because they do not believe voting can produce outcomes they desire. We therefore included questions related to the importance of internal and external political efficacy.

Based on the results of the survey, we fielded an experiment designed to increase turnout among low-propensity voters. A special election in June 2019 provided the opportunity to test messages targeting logistical and psychological determinants of voting. Elections took place in two California State Senate Districts: a Southern California district within Los Angeles County with lower past turnout, and a rural Northern California district with higher past turnout. The Northern California district contained a mixture of counties that had and had not implemented the Voter's Choice Act, a suite of reforms intended to make voting more convenient. We were therefore able to test messages on populations with different historic turnout records and different logistical barriers to voting.

Survey

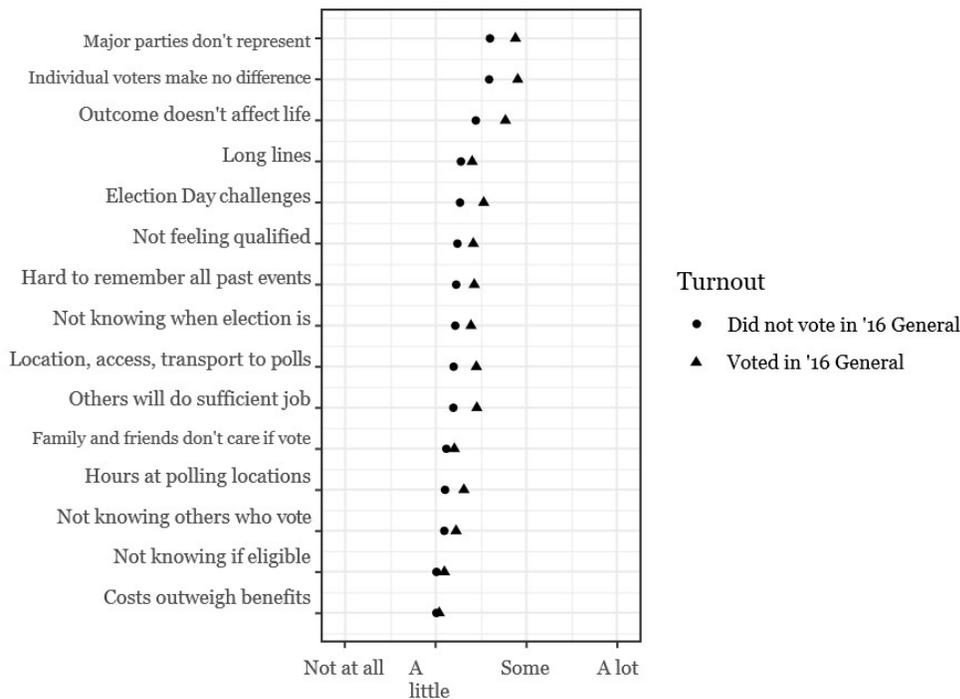
To gain insight into the explanation's citizens offer for not turning out to vote, we fielded a survey of Californians in the late summer and early fall of 2018. Respondents were recruited through Lucid. The survey yielded 11,053 responses from citizens, 83% of whom reported being registered to vote. All respondents were asked a series of questions designed to capture, directly and indirectly, some features that might lead an eligible person to abstain from voting.

Our sample frame is the citizen voting age population of California, based on the characteristics of that frame reported in the 2016 American Community Survey. So that our sample of respondents would reflect this larger population, we sampled to meet targets of respondents matching the distributions of key demographic characteristics of voting age citizens: gender, age, education levels, race, ethnicity, and region. We created survey weights based on those targets, using gender on its own, the joint distribution of age by education (our categories for the ages of respondents are 18-24, 25-44, 45-64, and 65 and older, and for education they are high school or less, some college, Bachelor's, or graduate degree) and the joint distribution of race by ethnicity (our categories for race are White, Black, Asian, and Other, and our

categories for ethnicity are Hispanic or Not Hispanic). All of our reported results incorporate these weights.

We first presented respondents with a list of potential reasons for abstention and asked them to rate “how much you think each keeps **people like you** from turning out to vote in **national and statewide general elections.**” The average importance of each reason is presented in Figure 1, separated into respondents who did and did not vote in the 2016 Presidential election. Voters and nonvoters’ ratings of the importance of the available reasons were similar. For voters and nonvoters alike, the three reasons rated as most influential were that major parties don’t represent them, that individual voters make no difference, and that the outcome of the election does not have a big effect on their life. These responses suggest a lack of external efficacy (Lane 1959)—many citizens seem to think that voting in an election will not produce outcomes they desire.

Further evidence of a lack of external efficacy comes from an open-ended follow-up question. After rating the impact of the reasons listed in figure 1, respondents were asked whether there were “other reasons you believe keep people like you from turning out to vote in national and statewide elections.” Around 3,800 respondents



How much does this keep people like you from voting?

Figure 1: Reasons why someone might not turn out to vote.

provided some answer to this question; these responses were coded into nine non-mutually-exclusive categories. The results can be found in Figure 2. Two of the most common types of responses involved a lack of efficacy: the sense that votes don't actually matter to election outcomes, and a lack of caring about elections themselves. The former category includes general references to one's vote not counting, as well as a number of references to elections being fixed, rigged, or tampered with. In the latter category, respondents mentioned not caring who gets elected and a general sense of apathy about politics. A related and common category involved the quality of options in elections—around 10% of responses mentioned that they don't have any good options in elections, or that all politicians are corrupt or incompetent.

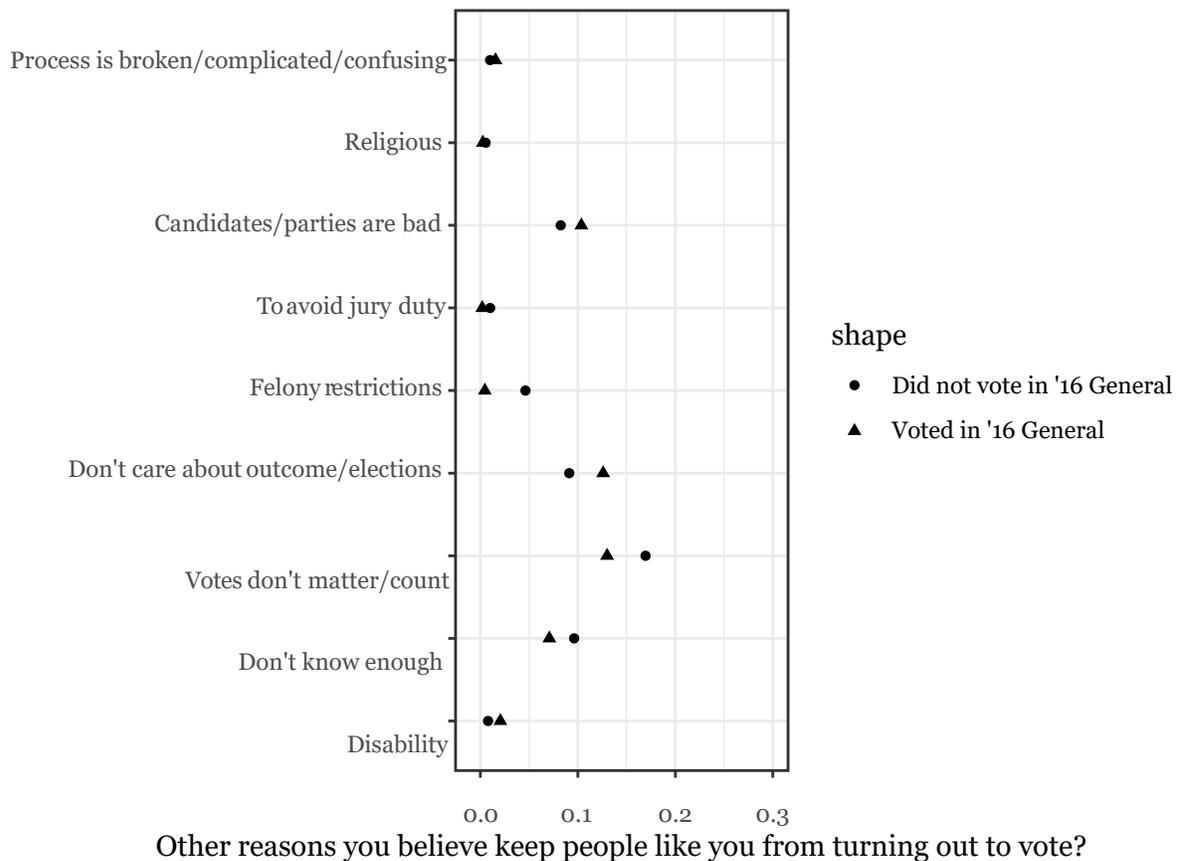


Figure 2: Proportion of respondents giving any additional reason why people don't vote whose responses fell into the listed categories. Categories are not mutually exclusive.

Many respondents also referenced a lack of internal efficacy (Balch 1974; Niemi, Craig, and Mattei 1991) as a reason why people do not vote in both the open- and closed-ended questions. In the closed-ended question displayed in Figure 1, many respondents agreed that "not feeling qualified" was a common reason not to vote, and 8% of responses in the open-ended follow-up question mentioned people not knowing enough to vote. Other questions in the survey support the idea that feeling unqualified is an obstacle to voting. For example, almost half of respondents disagreed with the statement that "the average person has enough information about local government to participate in elections."



Although nonvoters rate external and internal efficacy as reasons why people like them don't vote, Figure 1 shows that voters generally rate these as greater obstacles than nonvoters. This pattern suggests that voters and nonvoters are simply reporting widely-shared reasons for nonvoting, reasons they may have seen or heard in the media, and not the actual reasons they are not voting. Indeed, research has long since shown that people cannot accurately report on the reasons for their behaviors and instead tend to report popular explanations for their behaviors (Nisbett and Wilson 1977). Voters may be more exposed to the media than nonvoters and so may endorse these explanations at higher rates than nonvoters.

In the open-ended responses, however, nonvoters are more likely than voters to say that "votes don't matter" or "don't count." They are also more likely to mention "not knowing enough." We also find that people who say the average person does not have enough information about local government to participate in elections are less likely to vote. Among those who said this, 41% did not vote in 2016, compared to 24% of those who said otherwise. These differences in internal efficacy between voters and nonvoters remain highly significant when included in regression models with demographic controls.

Non-voting respondents also scored lower on political knowledge items in the survey than voting respondents did: those who did not know that the next Congressional election was in the month of November were 24 percentage points less likely to vote than those who did. Respondents who were able to name both major political parties were 26 percentage points more likely to vote than those who could not, and those who knew that the Republicans are the more conservative party were 31 points more likely to have voted than those who did not. These differences also persist when included in regression models with controls for a variety of demographic variables.

Taken together, the survey responses suggest that internal and external efficacy play a key role in how people explain the decision not to vote. These responses do not necessarily reflect the causal processes leading to our respondents' turnout; we must use caution in interpreting the accounts people provide for the causes of their behavior (Nisbett and Wilson 1977), and other forces not highlighted here, like logistical hurdles and social pressure, are important drivers of voting. However, the ways in which people, especially nonvoters, explain their decisions serve as a starting point for the design of interventions that increase the likelihood of voting.

Field Experiment

Based on the results of the survey, we designed an intervention to increase turnout among low-propensity voters in two June 2019 special elections for seats in the California State Senate. We collaborated with the non-partisan government reform group California Common Cause to deliver this intervention. The intervention took the form of letters (shown in the Appendix) mailed to registered voters who had missed voting in at least one of the previous five major elections. We randomly sent these voters one of four different messages encouraging them to vote. In addition to treatments targeting the efficacy-related feelings suggested by the survey, the intervention tested the effects of information about a new policy, the Voter's Choice Act (VCA), that sought to make voting more convenient.

The study population consisted of all voters registered in the two California State Senate Districts holding special elections (Districts 1 & 33) who had missed voting in at least one of the previous five major elections. This amounted to a total of 793,215 eligible participants. Of these, 253,788 participants were assigned to receive a treatment or placebo treatment letter; the remainder of the eligible participants served as a control group.

The first message was a “Smaller Districts” treatment and targeted external efficacy. It encouraged recipients to think that their vote could make a difference in the upcoming elections due to the smaller districts and subnational focus of State Senators. A second message, the “Wisdom of the Crowds” treatment, targeted internal efficacy by telling recipients that elections can turn small amounts of knowledge from many people into a better outcome for everyone. A third message, the “Party Information” treatment, informed voters about differences between the Democratic and Republican parties by including small excerpts from the state parties’ platforms. Finally, the “VCA Information” treatment informed the recipient of changes in the voting process following California’s Voter’s Choice Act, including the implementation of vote centers and the expansion of early voting. We sent some additional voters a “placebo” message that simply informed them of the upcoming election and encouraged them to vote. The Appendix shows the wording of the letters. We timed the letters so that respondents received them about five days before election day (which we confirmed by mailing letters to two of the authors).

In assigning participants to treatment conditions, we divided participants into blocks based on district, birth year, and level of turnout in prior elections. Participants were eligible for different treatment conditions depending on their county and State Senate District of residence. In all, 70,270 participants received the placebo treatment letter, 43,010 received the VCA Information treatment, 53,544 received each of the Wisdom of the Crowds and Smaller Districts treatment, and 33,419 received the Party Information treatment.

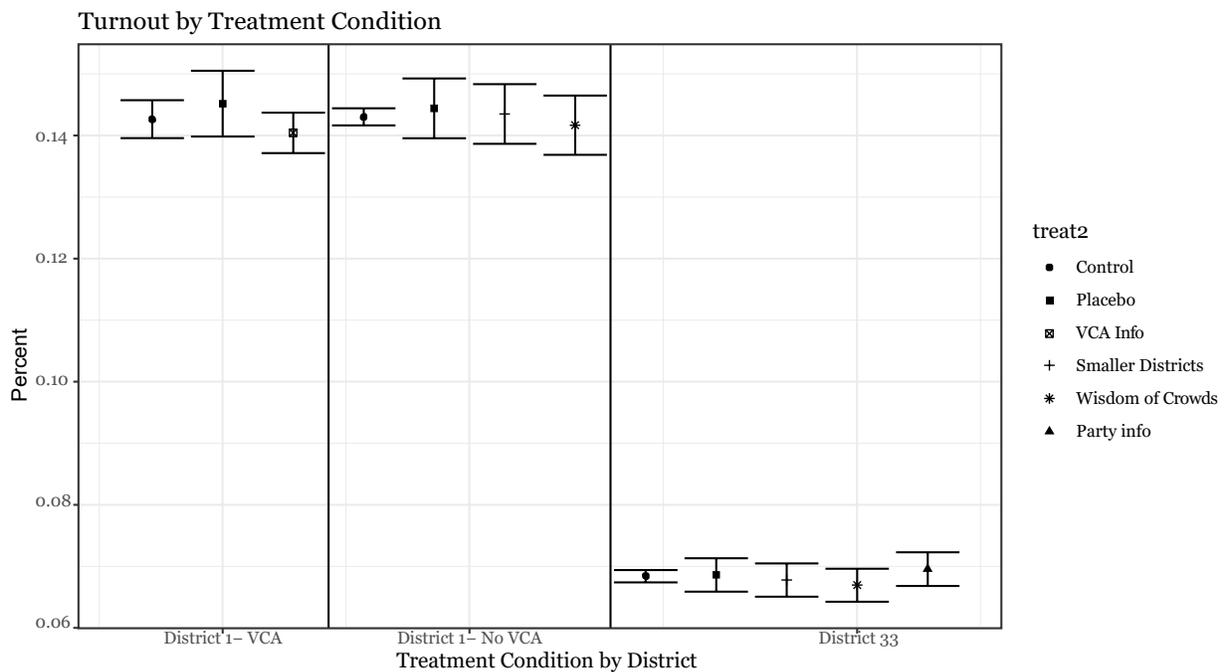




Figure 3: Turnout by District and Treatment Condition. The figure shows the treatment effect estimates in District 1 (rural) and District 33 (LA County). Voter's Choice Act (VCA) was only implemented in two counties in District 1, so the figure shows separately the District 1 results for these two counties and for the remaining Non-VCA counties. VCA was not implemented in District 33. In all three districts, the figure shows that the treatments did not increase turnout noticeably from the control condition. It also shows much higher rates of turnout in the more rural District 1 than the urban District 33.

Figure 3 presents the experimental results, showing the level of turnout in each district and treatment condition. It shows the District 1 results separately for the two counties that implemented VCA and the remaining counties that did not. The figure suggests that the treatment conditions did not differ significantly from one another in their turnout rates, nor from the placebo treatment. In every case, voters turned out at slightly higher rates in the placebo condition relative to the control condition, though the differences are not statistically significant. The condition in which we informed participants about the party platforms had higher turnout than the other conditions, but again the differences are substantively small and not statistically significant at conventional levels.

To confirm these findings, we pooled all treatments and analyzed the results using OLS regressions of turnout on an indicator for receiving any of the treatment letters. Table 1 shows these estimates. The simplest specification includes only State Senate District controls; the three further specifications add controls for prior turnout, gender, party, and randomization block.¹ The final model applies the fourth specification to especially low-propensity voters, defined as those who had voted in half or fewer of the previous five major elections.

Across the four specifications, the coefficients on the treatment indicator are small and precisely estimated. Results are substantively similar when analyses are repeated for each individual treatment condition within each district: though coefficients differ slightly in sign and magnitude across specifications, no treatment has a robust effect on turnout in either direction. We therefore cannot conclude that any treatment had an effect on turnout.



Conclusion

This article investigated how we can increase turnout among low propensity voters. We first presented exploratory results from a survey of California voters and nonvoters. In the survey, many respondents suggested that people do not vote because they are not adequately informed and do not feel that elections will produce the outcomes they desire. In responses to open-ended questions, nonvoters were more likely to mention these reasons than were voters, a pattern that held up with standard control variables. Additionally, lack of knowledge about basic political facts, such as being able to name the two major parties in the US, strongly predicted turnout.

Dependent variable: Turnout in 2019 Special Election

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Treatment	-0.0002 (0.001)	-0.0001 (0.001)	-0.0003 (0.001)	-0.0004 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)
Observations	738,529	738,524	738,524	738,524	476,133
R ²	0.015	0.086	0.124	0.124	.036
Adjusted R ²	0.015	0.086	0.124	0.124	.035
District control	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Turnout control		✓	✓	✓	✓
Turnout x treatment		✓	✓	✓	✓
Block fixed effects			✓	✓	✓
Gender & party control			✓	✓	✓
Gender and party x treatment				✓	✓
Low turnout only					✓

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 1: Results of regressions of turnout in the 2019 special election on treatment conditions and control variables. All treatments are pooled together with the placebo condition. All models contain District 33 and District 1 counties pooled together, excluding the 2 counties implementing the VCA. Model 5 estimates are only from those who had voted in less than half of the previous five major elections for which they were eligible. *Models 2, 3, and 4 were registered prior to analysis.

We drew on these survey results to develop messages targeting feelings of inadequacy and inefficacy. A field experiment testing these messages yielded precisely-estimated null effects: our intervention did not increase turnout among low-propensity voters. Though our survey demonstrates that many nonvoters justify their abstention with references to political efficacy, the results of our intervention suggest that messages targeting feelings of efficacy were not effective. Of all the treatments, the letter informing respondents about the platforms of the two parties showed the most promise, but this result could have arisen by chance. Nevertheless, helping voters learn what they need to know to feel confident enough to vote may be worth pursuing in follow up studies. Further work is needed to develop interventions that successfully encourage low-propensity voters into the electorate.

¹Specifications 2-4 were preregistered here. We include covariate interactions with treatment (Lin 2013). We centered the control variables so that they have mean zero, including indicator variables. As a result, we can interpret the estimates as the average treatment effect even when we include treatment interactions with covariates.



References

- Balch, George I. 1974. "Multiple Indicators in Survey Research: The Concept "Sense of Political Efficacy"." *Political Methodology*, 1–43.
- Brady, Henry E, Sidney Verba, and Kay Lehman Schlozman. 1995. "Beyond SES: A resource model of political participation." *American Political Science Review* 89 (2): 271–94.
- Enos, Ryan D., Anthony Fowler, and Lynn Vavreck. 2014. "Increasing Inequality: The Effect of Govt Mobilization on the Composition of the Electorate." *The Journal of Politics* 76 (1): 273–88.
- Finkel, Steven E. 1985. "Reciprocal effects of participation and political efficacy: A panel analysis." *American Journal of Political Science*, 891–913.
- Gerber, Alan S., Donald P. Green, and Christopher W Larimer. 2008. "Social Pressure and Voter Turnout: Evidence from a Large-Scale Field Experiment." *American Political Science Review*, 33–48.
- Gerber, A. S., and D. P. Green. 2000. "The Effects of Canvassing, Telephone Calls, and Direct Mail on Voter Turnout: A Field Experiment." *American Political Science Review* 94 (September): 653–63.
- Lane, Robert E. 1959. *Political Life: Why People Get Involved in Politics*. The Free Press of Glencoe.
- Lin, Winston. 2013. "Agnostic Notes on Regression Adjustments to Experimental Data: Reexamining Freedman's Critique." *The Annals of Applied Statistics* 7 (1): 295–318.
- Niemi, Richard G., Stephen C. Craig, and Franco Mattei. 1991. "Measuring Internal Political Efficacy in the 1988 National Election Study." *American Political Science Review* 85 (4): 1407–13.
- Nisbett, Richard E., and Timothy D. Wilson. 1977. "Telling More Than We Can Know: Verbal Reports on Mental Processes." *Psychological Review* 84 (3): 231–59.
- Verba, Sidney, and Gabriel Almond. 1963. *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.



Appendix with Treatment Letters

Small Districts

(header)

YONNY NUNEZ
6402 MIRAMONTE
BLVD LOS ANGELES,
CA 90001

Dear Registered Voter,

You are currently a registered voter in the State of California. *This letter is to remind you that a Election for California State Senate District 1 will be held on Tuesday, June 4, 2019.* Polls will be open from 7 AM to 8 PM on Election Day. Don't forget to vote!

National politicians can sometimes seem like they don't represent you. State politics, however, is different. **California state senators have smaller districts than national senators, so it's easier for you to make your voice heard.** State politicians, like the ones you can vote for in the June 4 election, need to listen to people in their district, no matter what's going on in national politics.

Please vote on June 4!

If you have any questions about the voting process, please visit the official Secretary of State website (<https://www.sos.ca.gov/>) or call your County Registrar of Voters. We hope you will vote in the upcoming June election!

Sincerely,

(signature)

e)

Rey López-Calderón, Executive Director California Common Cause



Wisdom of Crowds

[D33_W]

(header)

YONNY NUNEZ
6402 MIRAMONTE
BLVD LOS ANGELES,
CA 90001

Dear Registered Voter,

You are currently a registered voter in the State of California. *This letter is to remind you that a Election for California State Senate District 33 will be held on Tuesday, June 4, 2019.* Polls will be open from 7 AM to 8 PM on Election Day. Don't forget to vote!

One purpose of elections is to take the experiences of millions of voters and put them together. By voting in the upcoming election, you can help your district make its choice. Even if each individual voter knows only a little, adding all that knowledge together can help make choices that represent everybody. Have you heard about the “wisdom of the crowds”?

Be part of it! Do your part and vote. Please vote on June 4!

If you have any questions about the voting process, please visit the official Secretary of State website (<https://www.sos.ca.gov/>) or call your County Registrar of Voters. We hope you will vote in the upcoming June election!

Sincerely,

(signature)

Rey López-Calderón, Executive Director California Common Cause



Party Platforms

[D33_PP1]
(header)

YONNY NUNEZ
6402 MIRAMONTE
BLVD LOS ANGELES,
CA 90001

Dear Registered Voter,

You are currently a registered voter in the State of California. *This letter is to remind you that a Primary Election for California State Senate District 33 will be held on Tuesday, June 4, 2019.* Polls will be open from 7 AM to 8 PM on Election Day. Don't forget to vote!

Many people feel like they don't know enough about politics to vote. **But if you have a sense for what the parties stand for, you actually know more than many people!** Here are statements from each of the California state parties' platforms for office.

- The California **Democratic Party** supports “excellence in education from pre-school through college; universal, affordable health care; gun violence prevention; protecting California’s natural resources, air, and water through the use of renewable sources of energy; and continually developing innovative measures to counter global warming and pollution.”
- The California **Republican Party** supports “a vibrant, prosperous and safe California defined by a robust and growing world-class economy, strong and healthy families, and reformed and responsive state and local governments that serve all people while protecting individual liberty.”

One purpose of elections is to take the experiences of millions of voters and put them together. By voting in the upcoming election, you can help your district make a better choice. Even if each individual voter knows only a little, adding all that knowledge together can help make choices that represent everybody.

Be part of it! Do your part and vote. Please vote on June 4!

If you have any questions about the voting process, please visit the official Secretary of State website (<https://www.sos.ca.gov/>) or call your County Registrar of Voters. We hope you will vote in the upcoming June election!

Sincerely,

(signature)

Rey López-Calderón, Executive Director California Common Cause



Party Platforms (reversed order)

(header)

YONNY NUNEZ
6402 MIRAMONTE
BLVD LOS ANGELES,
CA 90001

Dear Registered Voter,

You are currently a registered voter in the State of California. *This letter is to remind you that a Primary Election for California State Senate District 33 will be held on Tuesday, June 4, 2019.* Polls will be open from 7 AM to 8 PM on Election Day. Don't forget to vote!

Many people feel like they don't know enough about politics to vote. **But if you have a sense for what the parties stand for, you actually know more than many people!** Here are statements from each of the California state parties' platforms for office.

- The California **Republican Party** supports “a vibrant, prosperous and safe California defined by a robust and growing world-class economy, strong and healthy families, and reformed and responsive state and local governments that serve all people while protecting individual liberty.”
- The California **Democratic Party** supports “excellence in education from pre-school through college; universal, affordable health care; gun violence prevention; protecting California's natural resources, air, and water through the use of renewable sources of energy; and continually developing innovative measures to counter global warming and pollution.”

One purpose of elections is to take the experiences of millions of voters and put them together. By voting in the upcoming election, you can help your district make a better choice. Even if each individual voter knows only a little, adding all that knowledge together can help make choices that represent everybody.

Be part of it! Do your part and vote. Please vote on June 4!

If you have any questions about the voting process, please visit the official Secretary of State website (<https://www.sos.ca.gov/>) or call your County Registrar of Voters. We hope you will vote in the upcoming June election!

Sincerely,

(signature)

Rey López-Calderón, Executive Director California Common Cause



Placebo

[D1_P]
(header)

YONNY NUNEZ
6402 MIRAMONTE
BLVD LOS ANGELES,
CA 90001

Dear Registered Voter,

You are currently a registered voter in the State of California. *This letter is to remind you that a Election for California State Senate District 1 will be held on Tuesday, June 4, 2019.* Polls will be open from 7 AM to 8 PM on Election Day. Don't forget to vote!

Please vote on June 4!

If you have any questions about the voting process, please visit the official Secretary of State website (<https://www.sos.ca.gov/>) or call your County Registrar of Voters. We hope you will vote in the upcoming June election!

Sincerely,

(signature)

Rey López-Calderón, Executive Director California Common Cause



VCA

[D1VCA_1]
(header)

YONNY NUNEZ
6402 MIRAMONTE
BLVD LOS ANGELES,
CA 90001

Dear Registered Voter,

You are currently a registered voter in the State of California. *This letter is to remind you that a Election for California State Senate District 1 will be held on Tuesday, June 4, 2019.* Polls will be open from 7 AM to 8 PM on Election Day. Don't forget to vote!

Our elected officials want to ensure that every eligible Californian has the opportunity to vote. State officials created the "Voter's Choice Act" in order to modernize elections in California. The Act allows counties to conduct elections under a new model which provides greater flexibility and convenience.

This new election model allows voters to choose how, when, and where to cast their ballot by:

- Mailing every voter a ballot
- Expanding in-person early voting
- Allowing voters to cast a ballot at any vote center within their county

Sacramento County has adopted the Voter's Choice model. You will receive a ballot in the mail and for more information about other voting options, you can go to <http://www.elections.saccounty.net/VoteCenters/Pages/Vote-Center.aspx>

Please vote on or before June 4!

If you have any questions about the voting process, please visit the official Secretary of State website (<https://www.sos.ca.gov/>) or call your County Registrar of Voters. We hope you will vote in the upcoming June election!

Sincerely,

(signature)

Rey López-Calderón, Executive Director California Common Cause



RESEARCH

HOW DID THE VOTER'S CHOICE ACT AFFECT TURNOUT IN 2018?

Eric McGhee, Public Policy Institute of California

Mindy Romero, Center for Inclusive Democracy at the University of Southern California

Laura Daly, University of Southern California

Thad Kousser, University of California, San Diego

Abstract. In its first year of implementation, did the Voter's Choice Act (VCA) change turnout patterns in the counties – Madera, Napa, Nevada, Sacramento, and San Mateo – that adopted this new reform? How did this reform affect the turnout of groups of Californians – young voters, Latinos, and Asian Americans– who have often participated in elections at lower rates than others? We address these questions by gathering data on turnout rates, voter demographics, and electoral competition from 2002 through the primary and general elections of 2018, comparing trends in the adopting counties to the rest of the state.

Looking at the turnout of all eligible voters, the VCA appeared to bring an increase in turnout of approximately three percentage points in the 2018 general election as well as a boost of about three and a half percentage points in the primary. The five counties that implemented the VCA saw their turnout rise more steeply than the participation increase seen in other counties from 2014 to 2018, with this straightforward comparison yielding similar findings to a statistical analysis that considers historical trends since 1990 as well as the level of electoral competition in each county. We also looked at the relative turnout of young voters, Latinos, and Asian Americans, but found little evidence that the reform had improved or worsened the representativeness of the voting electorate. However, firm conclusions about these subgroups are more difficult because their turnout rates vary more widely from county to county than for voters overall.

I. Background on the Voter's Choice Act

In 2016, Governor Jerry Brown signed Senate Bill 450, which allows California counties to choose to adopt a new voting model.¹ Known as the Voter's Choice Act (VCA), this law directs participating counties to mail every registered voter a vote- by-mail ballot which the voter can mail in, drop off at a secure ballot box, or drop off at a newly established Vote Center. The VCA also provided more services to voters using the new Vote Centers. At a Vote Center, voters can now cast their ballots in person, drop off their VBM ballots, register to vote as late as election day through "conditional" voter registration, receive replacement ballots, use an accessible voting machine, and receive language assistance. Voters may vote at any Vote Center in their county up to ten days before Election Day.



The new voting system is designed to make the voting process more convenient for voters in California, while at the same time potentially increasing voter turnout and reducing the cost of conducting elections. The VCA has been implemented in phases, and mostly at each county's discretion. Of California's 58 counties, only 14 were eligible to opt into the VCA system during the 2018 election. Five did: Madera, Napa, Nevada, Sacramento and San Mateo Counties. All other California counties were eligible to adopt the model in 2020, and ten more chose to do so in the 2020 primary. All counties are mailing every voter a vote-by-mail ballot this fall in response to the threat of COVID-19, but this policy shift was unrelated to the VCA. In fact, most counties will not be using Vote Centers, but consolidated precincts that still serve particular communities within the county. Thus, full statewide VCA implementation is still an open policy question.

II. Research Approach

To analyze the impact of the VCA on participation rates, we compare trends in voter turnout in the adopting counties to trends in the rest of California. We track whether their voter participation rates moved in parallel to the statewide pattern in 2018 or whether they diverged. This allows us to determine what level of turnout we might have expected in these counties if they had not implemented the new set of voting options in 2018. We also gather data on the average competitiveness of legislative contests in each county in order to account for the potential impact of tightly contested races on turnout. Our approach allows us to address three obstacles to evaluating the impact of the VCA on voter participation:

Long-term turnout patterns. On average, the counties that adopted the VCA in 2018 have had higher turnout rates than the rest of the state. Their average turnout was also higher in the 2014 midterm election, which was held before the passage of the VCA. We would expect them to maintain these higher levels of turnout even if they did not implement the VCA. Consequently, an analysis that simply compares 2018 turnout in the VCA-adopting counties to turnout in counties without the VCA would not reveal its impact; their turnout should be higher on average *after* the VCA because they consistently had higher participation rates even before the reform.

Higher 2018 turnout everywhere. The 2018 primary and general elections saw historically high levels of voter engagement, especially compared with the historically low turnout in 2014. With turnout of 50.5% of eligible voters, the November 2018 election had the highest participation of any midterm election since 1982. With turnout of 30.9% of eligible voters, the November 2014 election had the lowest participation rate of any midterm at least since 1910. Regardless of the voting system, we'd expect every county in California to see a rise in turnout from 2014 to 2018. Simply comparing participation in those two elections for a county that adopted the VCA does not reveal the reform's impact. Instead, we need to compare a county's rise in participation to the overall state trend.

Other campaign and election dynamics. In any given election, especially competitive races held in the legislative and congressional districts contested in a county can lead to a spike in turnout there. Also, counties that tend to vote for Democratic Party candidates saw especially strong spikes in turnout in the 2018 election. With only one year of experience to evaluate the VCA, it is important to account for such spikes, isolating the impact of the voting reform from patterns in electoral competition and from



partisan turnout trends. We measure and use statistical models to control for the competitiveness of Assembly, State Senate, and congressional races in each county, in order to rule out the possibility that any differential trends we observe are a function of where the state's most contested districts were located. We also use statistical models that control for partisan voting trends across counties, measured by their 2016 presidential vote, in order to rule out the possibility that a turnout surge in Democratic-leaning counties accounts for any of the patterns we observe.

II. How Did the VCA Affect Turnout of All Eligible Voters?

Turnout in the November 2018 General Election

We begin our analysis of the initial impact of the VCA on voter participation by looking at turnout trends in the five adopting counties and comparing them with the patterns in other counties.² This approach accounts for both the consistently high turnout rates achieved by these counties over the past two decades, as well as for the sharp increase in voter participation in 2018.

We focus on the turnout of eligible voters for two reasons. First, this provides the most complete measure of the effect of the reforms on the entire potential electorate. Second, it better captures the two possible impacts of the VCA: making it more (or potentially less) convenient to cast a ballot for those who are already registered, and making conditional registration a more (or less) streamlined process for those who are not. Analyzing the registered population instead of the eligible population as the baseline would capture the first effect, but it would not capture any changes in registration that emerge from the second.

Table 1 simply compares the rise in turnout from 2014 to 2018 in the VCA counties to the average rise in other counties. For both sets of counties, we take the average of the turnout rates in each county, giving each the same weight regardless of the size of its electorate. This approach views every California county as equally informative about the impact of voting methods on turnout, rather than giving dominant weight to data from the largest counties in each group.³ This is a sensible approach when trying to understand the effect of the reform, but it means our composite of the rest of the state will often differ from reported statistics. Figure 1 extends our approach by providing turnout data in every midterm election since 2002, ensuring that none of the adopting counties deviated from the state trend in an anomalous way in 2014. Finally, we conclude our discussion by summarizing the results of multivariate statistical models that allow us to control for the level of electoral competition in each county in each year, and to hold constant the year-to-year turnout trends and the different baseline levels of turnout that are typically seen in each county.



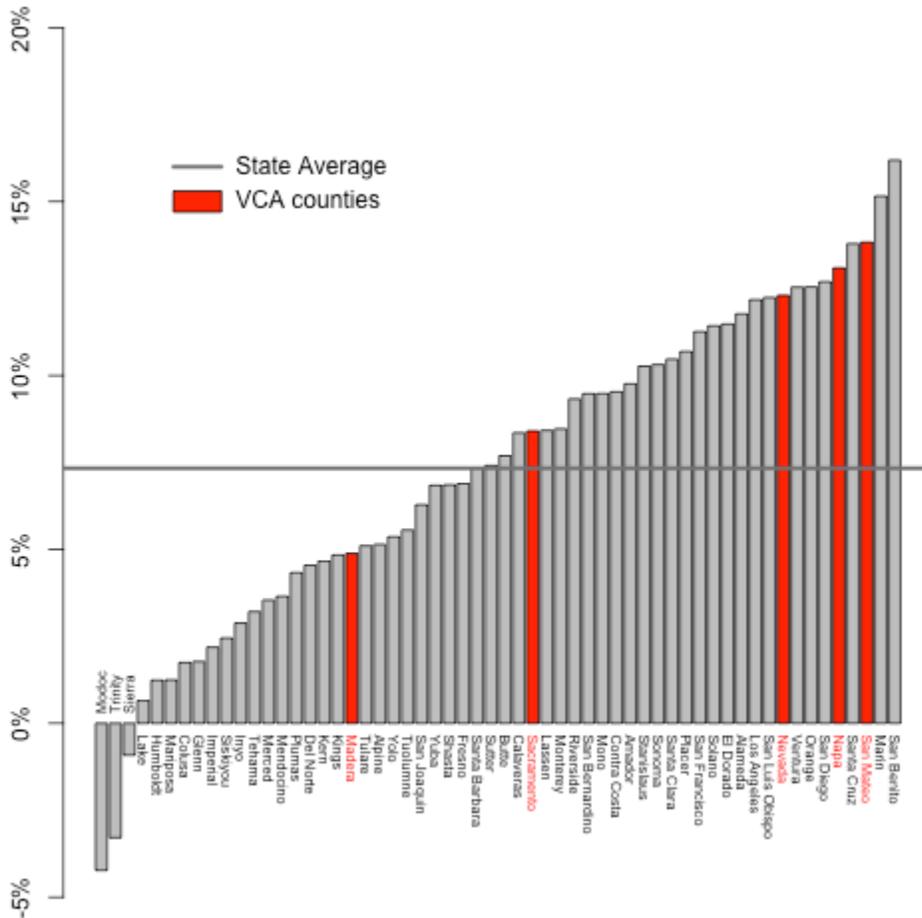
Table 1. General Election Turnout of Eligible Voters

	Increase in General Election Turnout, 2014 to 2018	Estimated Boost in Turnout: 3.0 percentage points
Average Increase in Counties Adopting the VCA	18.0	←
Average Increase in All Other Counties	15.0	
Counties Adopting the VCA		
Madera	11.6	
Napa	19.5	
Nevada	18.3	
Sacramento	17.2	
San Mateo	23.6	

As Table 1 shows, the increase in turnout from the November 2014 election to November 2018 was steeper in nearly all of the counties that adopted the VCA, compared with the trend in other parts of the state. The average rise in turnout was 18 percentage points in adopting counties, compared with 15 percentage points elsewhere.⁴ This straightforward approach yields an estimated increase in turnout due to the VCA of three percentage points in the general election. Looking back further in time through Figure 1 and estimating a statistical model reveal very similar trends, increasing our confidence about the VCA's initial positive impact on overall turnout.

Figure 1 shows each county's change in turnout in 2018 against its longer historical midterm turnout average from 1990 through 2014, with the VCA counties shown in red. There is a wide range of turnout change across counties, most of it positive, with an average increase of about 7 percentage points. However, all but one of the VCA counties had a 2018 turnout change more positive than the average county, offering confirmatory evidence of the VCA's positive impact on turnout.

Figure 1. General election turnout in 2018 against historical average



Note: Bars show the difference between 2018 general election turnout and the average 1990-2014 midterm turnout in the same county. VCA counties are shown in red. The horizontal reference line shows the unweighted average change across all counties.

Finally, we estimated a “differences-in-differences” statistical model predicting turnout in every county in each of the past eight midterm elections going back to 1990. We included year “fixed effects” to capture statewide turnout trends in each election, and county “fixed effects” to capture the consistent difference in baseline turnout levels across counties. The estimated impact of VCA adoption in this model closely mirrors our estimate from the straightforward comparison made in Table 1 (full model results are in Table A1 of the Appendix). The statistical model estimates that VCA adoption increased the turnout of eligible voters by 3.5 percentage points, with 97% confidence that the effect is not zero. We also ran two additional statistical models, one that controls for the level of electoral competition in each county in each year, and another that controls for the percentage of voters in each county who supported the Democrat (Hillary Clinton) in the 2016 presidential race. These models allow us to consider the alternative explanation that any effect we observe for the VCA is due to especially competitive races held in the adopting counties in 2018, or particularly high spikes in turnout in those counties in that year driven by partisan trends. In both analyses, we still find a significant and positive



impact of the reform. Controlling for the level of competition, VCA adoption increased the turnout of eligible voters by 3.2 percentage points, with 96% confidence that the effect is not zero. Controlling for partisan voting trends in each county, VCA adoption appeared to increase turnout by 2.4 percentage points, with 88% confidence that the effect is not zero.

B. Turnout in the Primary

Just as we did in our analysis of general election turnout, we analyze the impact of the VCA in the primary election by comparing the rise in turnout from 2014 to 2018 in the VCA counties to the average rise in other counties. We summarize this analysis in Table 2. Again, we see that turnout rose more sharply in nearly every VCA county than it did, on average, in the 53 counties that did not adopt the reform. In the counties that did not adopt, participation in the primary election rose an average of 6.8 percentage points between 2014 and 2018. In the five counties that did adopt the VCA, the increase in turnout in these years was steeper: 10.3 percentage points. Comparing these two increases, we estimate an increase in turnout due to the VCA of 3.5 percentage points in the primary election.

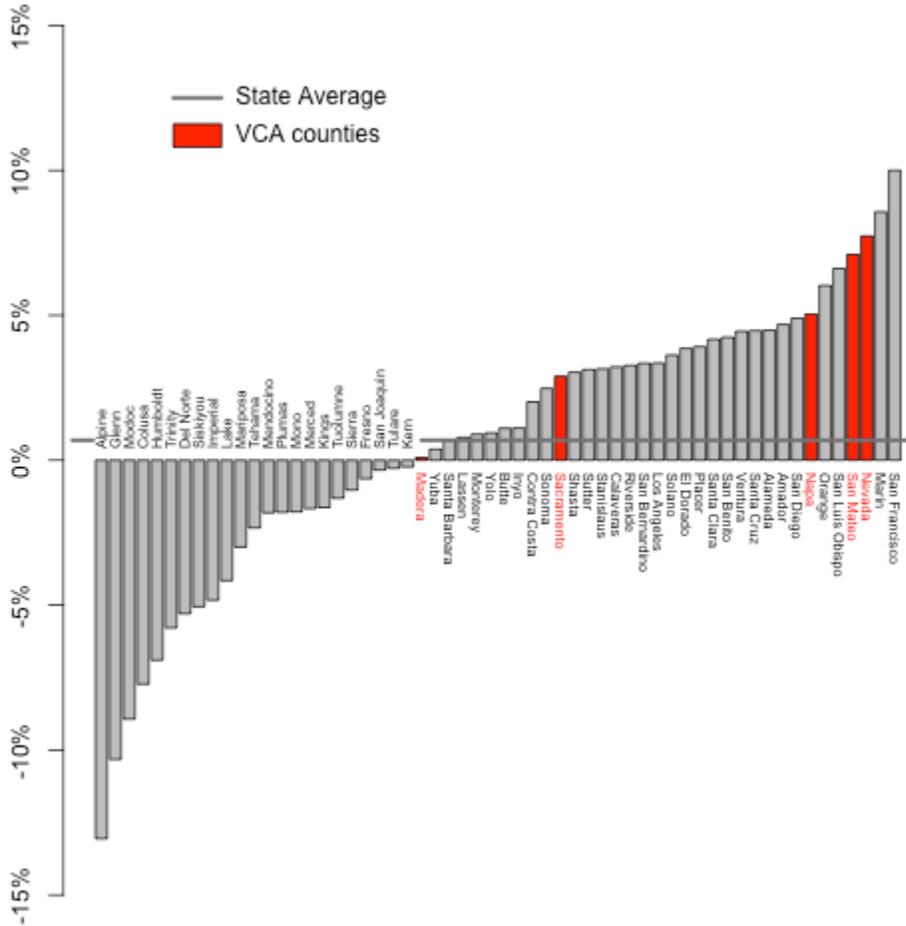
Again, looking at the longer time trends displayed in Figure 2 and using a statistical model yield similar conclusions, increasing our confidence that the reform brought its intended increase in overall turnout. Figure 2 plots each VCA county's 2018 increase (in red) against its average midterm turnout from 1990 through 2014. All other counties are again shown in gray. There is more of a mix of increases and decreases in these 2018 primary turnouts, but the VCA counties once again beat the average in four of five cases.

Table 2. Primary Election Turnout of Eligible Voters

	Increase in Primary Election Turnout, 2014 to 2018
Average Increase in Counties Adopting the VCA	10.3
Average Increase in All Other Counties	6.8
Counties Adopting the VCA	
Madera	4.6
Napa	9.7
Nevada	13.5
Sacramento	9.5
San Mateo	14.0

Estimated Boost
in Turnout:
3.5 percentage
points

Figure 2. Primary election turnout in 2018 against historical average





IV. How Did the VCA Affect Relative Turnout of Young, Latino, and Asian-American Voters?

An important question about the impact of the VCA on the representativeness of California elections is whether the increase that it appears to have brought to voter turnout overall was shared by all types of voters, especially those who have traditionally participated at lower rates. In this section, we focus on three groups that have often seen less representation in California’s electorate than in its population of eligible voters: young voters (aged 18-24), Latinos, and Asian-American voters. We look at the gap between turnout in these groups and turnout in groups that have historically been overrepresented. We find only limited evidence that the VCA has improved the representativeness of the electorate when measured this way.

To calculate these estimates, we begin with figures on the number of eligible voters in each group in each county during each year, provided to us by the California Department of Finance Demographic Unit. That serves as our denominator; our numerator comes from California Statewide Database voting data for the 2010, 2014, and the 2018 elections. Young voters are identified in each year through self-reported birth dates, with voters aged between 18 and 24 years considered young for our purposes. Latino and Asian-American voters are estimated through their surnames. We use these figures to calculate participation rates for each group in each county in each election. We then take the difference between turnout in each of these underrepresented groups and turnout in other groups. For Latinos and Asian Americans, the comparison group is those who are neither Latino nor Asian American; for young people, the comparison group is seniors 65 and older. We average across both adopting and non-adopting counties and look at how the difference between those two sets of counties changed in 2018, just as in our analysis of voters overall. Because Latinos and Asian Americans in particular are not evenly distributed across all 58 counties, we omit data from counties with fewer than 100 eligible voters in a group in 2014 or with missing data in any election, dropping one county from our analysis of young voters, four counties from our analysis of Latino voters, and five counties from our analysis of Asian-American voters.

Table 3. Change in the turnout gap

	Increase in General Election Turnout, 2014 to 2018	Increase in Primary Election Turnout, 2014 to 2018
Young voters (18-24)		
Average Change in Counties Adopting the VCA	10.1	-1.5
Average Change in All Other Counties	6.5	-1.2
Estimated Change in Gap	3.6	-0.3
Latino voters		
Average Change in Counties Adopting the VCA	-2.8	-5.0
Average Change in All Other Counties	-3.7	-4.3
Estimated Change in Gap	0.9	-0.6



Asian American voters		
Average Change in Counties Adopting the VCA	-5.9	-7.7
Average Change in All Other Counties	-5.7	-5.6
Estimated Change in Gap	-0.2	-2.1

Table 3 compares the average change between 2014 and 2018 in the gaps for the five counties that adopted the VCA to the same in all other counties. The difference between these increases yields our estimate of the impact of the reform's adoption. Positive values here mean the underrepresented group improved its position relative to the overrepresented group. There are few signs of any effect from the reform here. Most of the effects are smaller than a percentage point change, though the effect for young voters suggests an improvement of 3.6%, and the effect for Asian Americans suggests a worsening of 2.1 percentage points.

We also tested these effects with both the 2010 and 2014 elections as the pre-reform baseline comparison group. In these statistical models (displayed in detail in the Appendix), the effect sizes were comparable to the ones in Table 3 but none was measured with much statistical confidence. Overall, it is difficult to conclude that the VCA improved or worsened the relative position of these three underrepresented groups; in most cases the odds were better than not that the true effect was zero, and that probability was always at least 35 percent. With all of our analyses of small groups of voters, one year of implementation of the VCA can yield only preliminary lessons about its effects on turnout. Our statistical models indicate less confidence in estimates of the impact of VCA adoption on Latino and Asian-American voters because these turnout rates vary significantly across counties and across years. The concentrations of young, Latino, and Asian-American voters vary across the counties, and differ between the five counties that adopted it in 2018 and the rest of the state. All of these factors suggest that more experience with the implementation of the VCA is necessary in order to draw firm conclusions about its effect on voters in each of these groups.

In order to evaluate the impact of the VCA on participation in the 2018 elections, it is important to make careful comparisons. Because the five counties that adopted it had high turnout even before 2018, simply comparing their participation rates to those of other counties does not isolate the impact of the reform. Because turnout in 2018 was so much stronger all across California than it was in 2014, simply looking at the increase in turnout in the VCA counties from one midterm election to the next does not tell the full story, either. Instead, our analysis compares the increase in turnout from 2014 to 2018 in the VCA counties, compared with the average turnout increase in all other counties, in order to determine whether the reform in fact boosted participation.

We find that the VCA's adoption in 2018 led to modest yet significant increases in turnout by eligible voters of approximately three percentage points in the primary and general elections. Importantly, the rise in turnout among voters overall appears to be present as well in most of the groups we looked at that have had low levels of representation in California's electorate. However, none of the underrepresented groups we examined—young voters, Latinos, and Asian-Americans—showed clear signs of improving their turnout relative to groups that have traditionally been overrepresented.



1. For more information on the Voter's Choice Act (California Senate Bill 450), see:
http://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=201520160SB450

2. Our data on turnout in each county comes from the "Turnout Eligible" column of the "Voter Participation Statistics by County" table of the appropriate "Statement of the Vote," made available by the California Secretary of State in each election. These reports can be found at: <https://elections.cdn.sos.ca.gov/sov/2014-general/pdf/03-voter-participation-stats-by-county.pdf> (for the 2014 general election), <https://elections.cdn.sos.ca.gov/sov/2018-general/sov/03-voter-participation-stats-by-county.pdf> (for the 2018 general election), <https://elections.cdn.sos.ca.gov/sov/2014-primary/pdf/03-voter-participation-stats-by-county.pdf> (for the 2014 primary election), and <https://elections.cdn.sos.ca.gov/sov/2018-primary/sov/03-voter-participation-stats-by-county.pdf> (for the 2018 primary election).

3. An alternative approach would be to weight the importance of each county in our analysis, proportional to the size of that county's electorate. In this approach, turnout trends in Sacramento County (by far the largest of the counties that adopted the VCA) would account for much of the estimated turnout trend for adopting counties, while the trend for other counties would closely follow patterns in Los Angeles, San Diego, and Orange Counties. When we take this approach in our statistical models – weighting data from each county by the square root of the size of its eligible electorate– we estimate smaller positive impacts on turnout. In the general election, we estimate a 1.2% increase in turnout due to the implementation of the VCA (with 71% confidence of at least some effect), rather than a 3.5% increase. In the primary, we estimate a 2.0% increase in turnout due to the implementation of the VCA (with 92% confidence of at least some effect), rather than a 4.2% increase.

4. General election turnout in the counties that adopted the VCA averaged 38.74% in 2014 and rose to 56.78% in 2018, an increase of 18 percentage points. In the counties that did not adopt the VCA, the average turnout rate of all eligible voters was 37.0% in 2014 and then rose to 52.0% in 2018, an increase of 15 percentage points. Comparing these increases gives us an estimated boost in turnout due to the VCA of three percentage points. Note that this is a three percentage point increase in the portion of the eligible voter population that participated, rather than a percent of the turnout rate in 2014.

5. While we would prefer a consistent source for the 2018 general election, we have extensively analyzed whether Political Data, Incorporated and the Statewide Database report similar figures for the 2018 primary election, for which both have available data. Turnout rates for each subgroup of voters in each county are nearly perfectly correlated across the two sources for young voters and Latinos, and are solidly correlated for Asian-American voters. Data from the Statewide Database and Political Data, Inc. is derived from county voter registration records rather than from a sample of voters. Because of this, figures calculated from these sources are not susceptible to sampling error in the way that surveys and exit poll results are. The Statewide Database distinguishes Latinos and Asian Americans in the registration data from the general population by the use of Spanish and Asian surname lists which identify registrants with commonly occurring Spanish and Asian surnames. The Passel-Word Spanish surname list, published by the US Census Bureau, was utilized to identify Latinos. For Asian Americans, the US Census Bureau's surname lists for six major Asian-American ethnic groups were utilized: Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Korean, Asian Indian, and Vietnamese. Surname matching for Latinos is a commonly utilized methodology. However, confidence levels for Asian American groups can generally be lower as it has often been found to be more difficult to achieve accurate identification of Asian surnames. Surname matching is not reliable for white, non-Hispanic, and African American populations, and thus registration data is not available for these groups. Note: Some additional Latinos and Asian Americans may be registered to vote and not flagged by surname databases. For more information on methodology and limitations, please see:
<https://statewidedatabase.org/d10/Creating%20CA%20Official%20Redistricting%20Database.pdf>



Appendix

Table A1. Difference-in-differences models of total turnout, general elections, 1990-2018

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Intercept	0.441*** (0.012)	0.394*** (0.020)	0.496*** (0.031)
VCA county in 2018	0.035* (0.016)	0.032* (0.015)	0.024 (0.016)
County competitiveness	--	0.013 (0.045)	--
Presidential vote	--	--	-0.001* (0.000)
Presidential vote X 2018 election	--	--	0.002*** (0.000)
State fixed effects	X	X	X
Year fixed effects	X	X	X
Adjusted R ²	0.884	0.919	0.893
RMSE	0.032	0.029	0.031
N	464	464	464

Note: County competitiveness is a weighted average of the margin of victory across state legislative and congressional districts falling at least partially in each county. Weights reflect the share of each county's population falling in the district portion in question.



Table A2. Difference-in-differences models of total turnout, primary elections, 1990-2018

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Intercept	0.306*** (0.012)	0.291*** (0.020)	0.328*** (0.032)
VCA county in 2018	0.042** (0.016)	0.044** (0.017)	0.034* (0.016)
County competitiveness	--	-0.024 (0.019)	--
Presidential vote	--	--	0.000 (0.000)
Presidential vote X 2018 election	--	--	0.001*** (0.000)
State fixed effects	X	X	X
Year fixed effects	X	X	X
Adjusted R ²	0.890	0.888	0.894
RMSE	0.032	0.032	0.031
N	464	464	464

Note: County competitiveness is a weighted average of the margin of victory across state legislative and congressional districts falling at least partially in each county. Weights reflect the share of each county's population falling in the district portion in question.



Table A3. Difference-in-difference-in-differences models of subgroup turnout, primary elections, 2010-2018

	Young people (18-24)	Latinos	Asian Americans
Intercept	0.636*** (0.025)	0.444*** (0.038)	0.552*** (0.030)
In subgroup	-0.386*** (0.035)	-0.176* (0.038)	-0.252*** (0.043)
VCA county in 2018	0.016 (0.024)	0.026 (0.025)	0.029 (0.030)
VCA county in 2018 X In subgroup	0.032 (0.034)	0.009 (0.035)	0.001 (0.042)
State fixed effects	X	X	X
Year fixed effects	X	X	X
State fixed effects X In subgroup	X	X	X
Year fixed effects X In subgroup	X	X	X
Adjusted R ²	0.976	0.945	0.888
RMSE	0.041	0.037	0.051
N	348	324	312

Note: Data are aggregated turnout rates by county and election and within demographic subgroups. Each county-election has two turnout rates, one for the subgroup of interest and the other for a reference group. The reference group for young people is seniors 65 and older, and the reference group for Latinos and Asian Americans is those who are non-Asian-American and non-Latino. Counties with fewer than 100 eligible residents of the subgroup were dropped from the analysis.



Table A4. Difference-in-difference-in-differences models of subgroup turnout, primary elections, 2010-2018

	Young people (18-24)	Latinos	Asian Americans
Intercept	0.503*** (0.028)	0.273*** (0.023)	0.333*** (0.024)
In subgroup	-0.408*** (0.040)	-0.134*** (0.032)	-0.168 (0.034)
VCA county in 2018	0.026 (0.027)	0.028 (0.021)	0.032 (0.024)
VCA county in 2018 X In subgroup	0.004 (0.039)	-0.006 (0.030)	-0.018 (0.033)
State fixed effects	X	X	X
Year fixed effects	X	X	X
State fixed effects X In subgroup	X	X	X
Year fixed effects X In subgroup	X	X	X
Adjusted R ²	0.884	0.934	0.876
RMSE	0.032	0.032	0.041
N	348	324	312

Note: Data are aggregated turnout rates by county and election and within demographic subgroups. Each county-election has two turnout rates, one for the subgroup of interest and the other for a reference group. The reference group for young people is seniors 65 and older, and the reference group for Latinos and Asian Americans is those who are non-Asian-American and non-Latino. Counties with fewer than 100 eligible residents of the subgroup were dropped from the analysis.



RESEARCH

HOW DO CALIFORNIANS WANT TO CAST THEIR BALLOTS DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS?

*Thad Kousser, UC San Diego,
Mindy Romero, Center for Inclusive Democracy at the University of Southern California,
Mackenzie Lockhart, UC San Diego,
Seth Hill, UC San Diego,
and Jennifer Merolla, UC Riverside*

Abstract. In April 2020, how did Californians of all demographic groups want to cast their ballots during the COVID-19 pandemic, what changes to the electoral process would they support during this critical moment, and how would reforms made in 2020 reshape our state's electorate in the future? We address these questions by analyzing a statewide survey of a diverse sample of 12,276 eligible voters (adult citizens) conducted April 8-22, 2020. As a whole, California's eligible voters plan to vote by mail more than ever before in November 2020. Voting by mail is the method that gives them the most confidence in the integrity of election results, and they are strongly supportive of policies that expand access to voting by mail. The level of support for voting by mail differs across California's diverse racial and ethnic groups. Consistent with past studies, our survey found that Latino and African-American eligible voters are generally less likely to prefer this method of voting than non-Latino whites and Asian Americans. It will be important to consider the potentially disparate impacts that any election administration changes could bring and to conduct broad outreach efforts. When presented with scientific projections predicting a fall peak in the impact of COVID-19, eligible voters were even more likely to prefer voting by mail and to express concerns about waiting in line or working at a polling place that did not adhere to social distancing protocols. Specifying a set of social distancing guidelines for in-person voting resolved these concerns for many eligible voters of all types.

Funding Acknowledgment: We are grateful to the University of California Office of the President's Multicampus Research Program for providing funding for this survey through the MRP-17-454899 grant.

I. Background and Research Approach

With the COVID-19 pandemic dramatically disrupting everyday life in California and across the nation, state and local elections officials are seeking to adapt the way that they administer elections to ensure the safety of voters and their workers, while still securing access to the ballot and the integrity of elections. Sixteen states delayed their presidential primary elections because of the public health crisis (Corasaniti and Saul 2020), while two US senators introduced legislation to expand voting by mail and adopt other new procedures in November's presidential contest (Bowden 2020). Leading election law scholars have advanced proposals to expand voting by mail and to make elections accessible (Hasen 2020, Persily and Stewart 2020), and President Trump has weighed in on the topic frequently. By the



end of September, twenty-three states had made a change to their vote by mail policies, allowing at least 84% of American voters to cast a ballot by mail (Rabinowitz and Mayes 2020).

California's public officials and county election administrators now face the challenge of holding safe and accessible elections during a public health crisis. Fifteen of these counties, in which more than half of the state's registered voters reside, will be doing so while administering the Voter's Choice Act, a new law that directs participating counties to mail every registered voter a vote-by-mail ballot which the voter can mail in, drop off at a secure ballot box, or drop off at a newly established Vote Center. In other counties, voters in the March primary had the option of choosing to receive a mail ballot or voting at a neighborhood polling place. Governor Gavin Newsom's May 8 executive order, later supported by state legislation, requires all counties to send every registered voter a vote-by-mail ballot in November while also allowing in-person options that closely resemble those in the Voter's Choice Act. In the 2020 general election and in future contests held during the pandemic, how can these new options be tailored to the varied needs and demands of different types of voters in California?

To bring the voices of members of the electorate into this vital policy conversation, we conducted parallel surveys of eligible voters in California and in the nation overall in April, 2020. This research is designed to provide data that can inform state and local policy decisions, while at the same time contributing to the political science literature about how different types of voters want to cast their ballot and whether that has changed during the pandemic. We conducted each survey online, recruiting our sample through the online platform Lucid Fulcrum Exchange. This platform connects researchers to panels of respondents who have already provided their demographic information, making it possible for us to draw diverse samples that reflect the key characteristics – race, ethnicity, age, gender, and education levels – of our state and nation's citizen voting age populations. Coppock and McClellan (2019, 1) demonstrate that "demographic and experimental findings on Lucid track well with US national benchmarks." In analyses of a national survey, Kousser et. al (2020) have shown that eligible voters in America have become strongly supportive of vote-by-mail options, but find that there is an emerging partisan divide on these reforms (Lockhart et al. 2020).

In California, we focus on how eligible voters would like to see the November election run and how these views may change given different scenarios for the COVID-19 outbreak. We surveyed an especially large sample of eligible voters – 12,276 respondents – in order to gauge the perspective of members of the state's largest racial and ethnic groups. We fielded the survey from April 8-22, recording the views of a diverse sample in which 47.7% of respondents are white (non-Latino), 28.5% are Latino, 15.5% are Asian-American, and 9.2% are African-American (these numbers total 100.9% because some Latinos are members of other racial groups). Each of these figures are within 0.1 to 2.3 percentage points of the estimates for the state's citizen age voting population reported by the United States Census Bureau (2016). To further ensure that our findings reflect that population, we created survey weights based on the demographic characteristics of that population and report all results using those weights.

Because officials needed to plan to hold an election without knowing exactly how severe the COVID-19 crisis would be in the fall, we designed our survey to measure public opinion under different scenarios for the pandemic. We randomly divided our respondents into three groups. We presented two of these groups with truthful summaries of the projections of two widely-cited teams of scientists, with one team projecting a peak of the public health crisis in the spring of 2020 and the other projecting that its impact would peak in the fall if social distancing measures are relaxed at that time. The third group did not read any projections from us. (At the end of the survey, we provided all



respondents with information about both sets of projections, including links to the scientific reports underlying them produced by the University of Washington and the other at Imperial College London.) Because the groups were divided randomly, any differences in their views on the elections can be attributed to the projections that they read. As policymakers learn more about the timing of the pandemic's largest impacts, this approach can help inform them about the preferences of eligible voters under different scenarios. The projections we presented to respondents are below:

The **spring peak** scenario: "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 their peak in April, then gradually decline throughout the spring and into the summer."

The **fall peak** scenario: "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 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."

II. How Do Californians Want to Cast their Own Ballots?

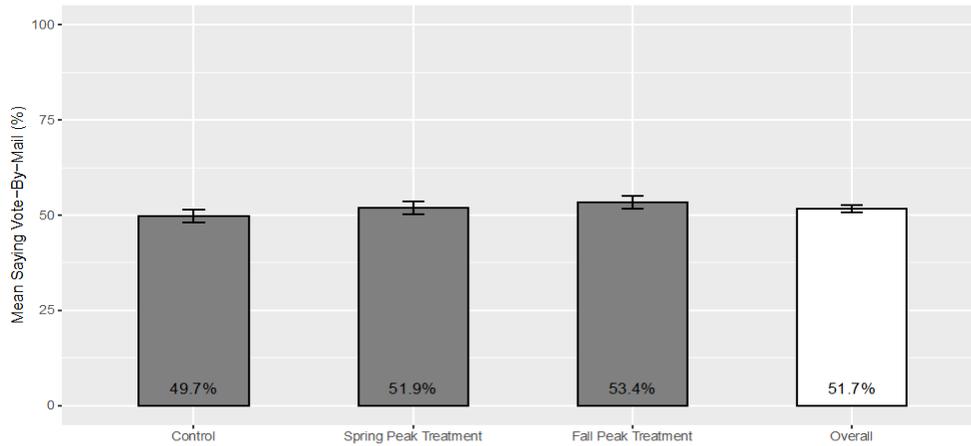
We present how our diverse sample of California's eligible voters prefer to cast their ballots in November in Figures 1 and 2. As with all of our pairs of figures, the first one reports how respondents overall answered a given question along with breakdowns that report the responses of those who read the "spring peak" and "fall peak" scenarios and those in the control condition, who did not read any projections. In the second figure, we break down responses by the state's largest racial and ethnic groups, ordered according to the percentage of the citizen voting-age population that they represent. Each column gives the percentage of a group answering the question a certain way, with the error bars around it representing the margin of error.

On the key question of how respondents would most prefer to cast their ballot, we found that overall 51.7% said that they would prefer to vote by mailing in their ballot. Another 18.9% selected the option of dropping off a ballot that had been automatically mailed to them a month before Election Day. Combining these two figures, a total of 70.6% of voters overall preferred to cast a ballot that has been mailed to them, far higher than the 57.8% of California voters who either mailed in or dropped off a mail ballot in the 2016 presidential election (California Secretary of State 2016). It appears that the COVID-19 crisis has led Californians, who have long voted by mail at a relatively high rate, to embrace this option even more. Further evidence that suggests this shift is related to the public health crisis comes from our survey experiment presenting some respondents with scenarios about the pandemic. In line with our expectations, eligible voters were most likely to prefer to vote by mail when they read projections about a fall pandemic peak. The 53.4% of respondents who chose this option after reading the fall peak scenario was significantly higher than the 49.7% among those who were not exposed to a COVID-19 projection, with this difference significant at the 95% confidence level that is the common standard in social science research. Also significantly different from the control condition was the 51.9% of respondents preferring to vote by mail after reading projections of a spring peak. Although this effect was not as strong as the impact of the fall peak scenario, it suggests that exposure to any scientific information that brought COVID-19 to the top of respondents' minds shifted them away from preferring to vote in person and toward casting a mail ballot.

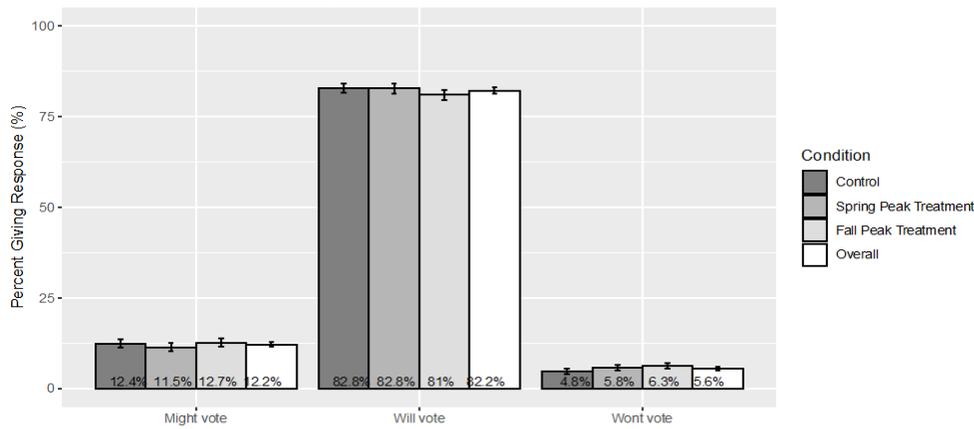


Figure 1. Personal Preferences on How to Cast a Ballot

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?



In the upcoming November 3 election, if your only option to cast a ballot in your county was an in-person option such as a traditional polling place or a professionally staffed county elections office, how likely would you be to cast a ballot?



In the upcoming November 3 election, if your only option to cast a ballot in your county was to vote by mailing in a ballot, how likely would you be to cast a ballot?

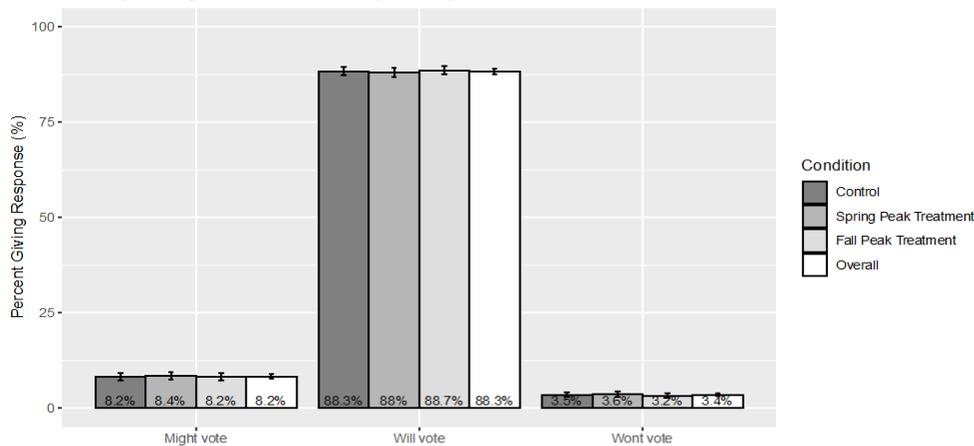
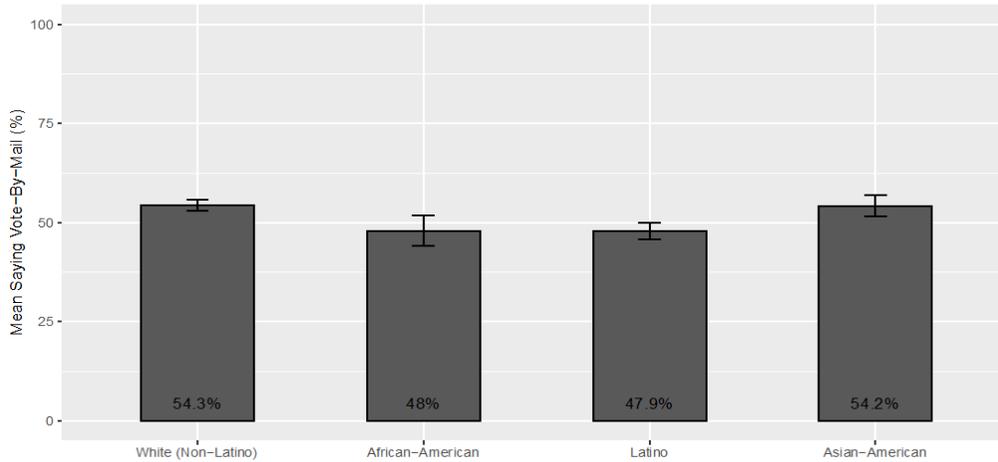


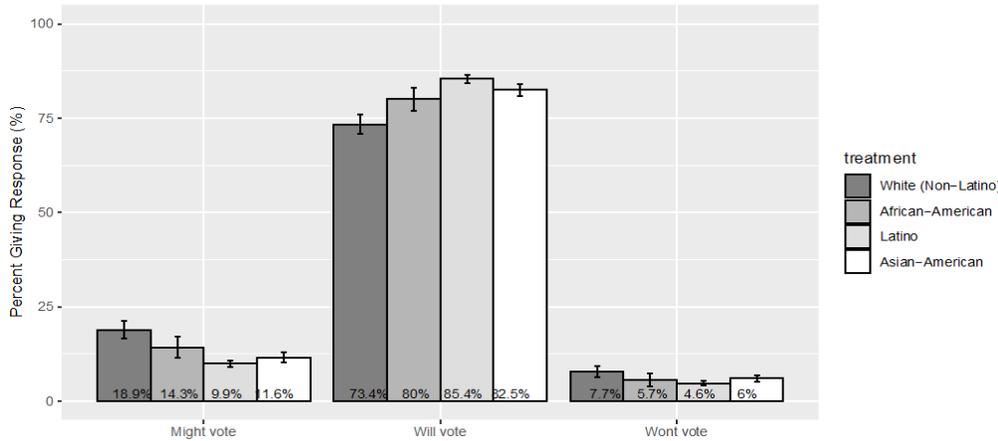


Figure 2. Personal Preferences on How to Cast a Ballot, by race and ethnicity

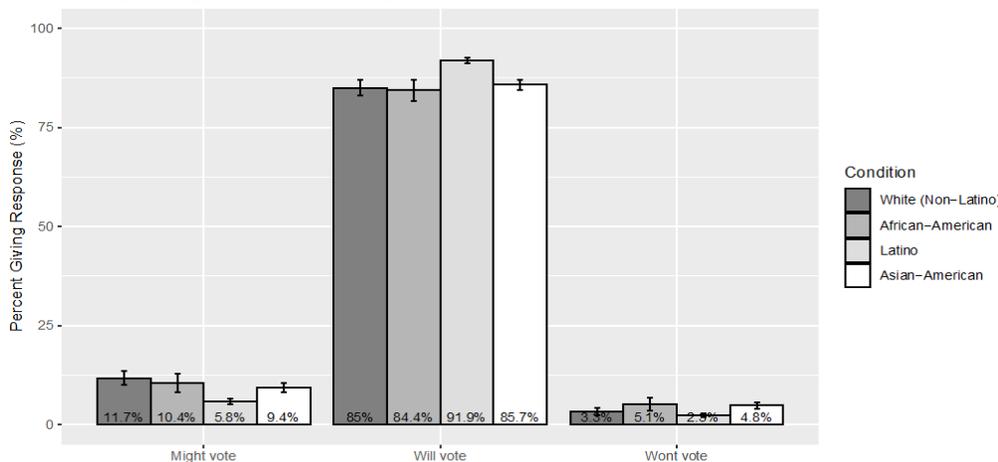
In the upcoming November 3 election, if you had the ability to cast a ballot in any way you wished, what would be your most preferred way to cast a ballot?



In the upcoming November 3 election, if your only option to cast a ballot in your county was an in-person option such as a traditional polling place or a professionally staffed county elections office, how likely would you be to cast a ballot?



In the upcoming November 3 election, if your only option to cast a ballot in your county was to vote by mailing in a ballot, how likely would you be to cast a ballot?





We also asked respondents whether they were likely to cast a ballot in November if voting in person was their only option and, subsequently, if voting by mail was their only option. For both questions, we removed from our analysis those who had, earlier in the survey, indicated that they “definitely” or “probably” would not vote in November, in order to focus on the plans of potential voters. (This excluded 1,296 respondents. In parallel analyses that we conducted including these respondents, our results were not substantively different). Overall, 5.6% responded that they would not vote if an in-person option was their only way to cast a ballot, with this rate being higher under the two COVID-19 scenarios. Looking at the last question, 3.4% overall reported that they would not vote if a mail ballot was their only option. Given California’s large voter population, with 25.3 million eligible voters and 20.7 million registered voters statewide (California Secretary of State 2020), these small percentages translate to hundreds of thousands of eligible voters who would be left out of the election. It will be important for state and local elections officials to conduct major outreach efforts designed to connect with those who prefer in-person voting options to keep them in California’s active electorate. Figure 2 breaks these questions down by racial and ethnic groups. Consistent with studies of voting in our state from 2002- 2012 conducted by the California Civic Engagement Project (2014), we find significant differences in preferences with 54.3% of non-Latino whites and 54.2% of Asian-American eligible voters selecting voting by mail as their top option, compared with 48.0% of African Americans and 47.9% of Latinos. These differences suggest that if any voting options are made completely unavailable to eligible voters, such changes could have a disparate impact across groups. When we asked likely voters (again, excluding the 1,296 respondents who had already reported that they were not likely to vote in November) whether they planned to cast a ballot if voting in person was their only option, 7.7% of non-Latino whites, 6% of Asian Americans, 5.7% of African Americans, and 4.6% of Latinos said that they would not vote. When we asked if they would vote if a mail ballot was their only option, 5.1% of African Americans, 4.8% of Asian Americans, 3.3% of non-Latino whites, and 2.3% of Latinos responded that they would not vote.

In analyses that we do not report here, we also investigated whether members of each racial and ethnic group responded differentially to our survey experiment exposing them to projections about COVID-19 scenarios. That is, did white respondents have one reaction to reading about a possible peak while Latinos, for instance, had a different reaction? We did not find any strong or consistent patterns indicating differential effects across any of our questions. While California’s major racial and ethnic groups do have different views about voting by mail, exposing them to scientific projections about the pandemic neither accentuated nor diminished these differences.

We also asked voters about their comfort levels with waiting in line at a polling place or working as a poll worker, either with or without social distancing measures implemented at the polling place. As Figure 3 shows, when we asked about comfort levels at polling places that did not implement social distancing, only half of those surveyed said that they would be comfortable waiting in line. This figure was lower, 46.5%, for those presented with the “fall peak” scenario, with that experimental effect significant at the 95% confidence level. Similarly, only 35.7% of respondents overall would feel comfortable being a poll worker in a precinct without social distancing, with this figure significantly lower, 32.2%, when a fall peak in the COVID-19 outbreak was projected. Notably, eligible voters became much more comfortable with waiting in lines (68.7%) or working at a polling place (47.4%) which adhered to a social distancing protocol, based on a set of recommendations provided by the NAACP (2020). Finally, respondents in every group were much more comfortable (83.9% overall) with dropping off their ballots at a drive-through location that followed social distancing, a method of casting or delivering ballots used in some states and counties.

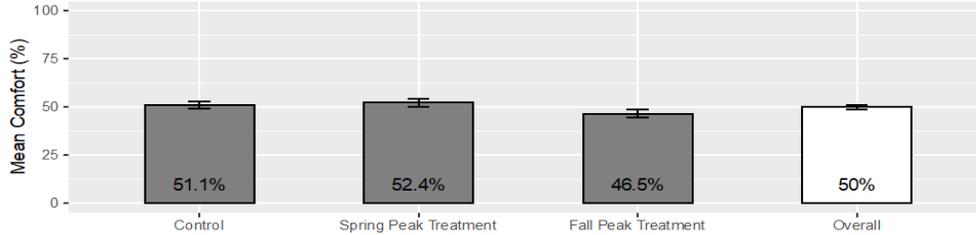


Figure 4 reveals important differences across racial and ethnic groups in average levels of comfort with in-person voting. Latino respondents were the most comfortable with waiting in line at a polling place that did not adhere to social distancing protocols (62%) and with being a poll worker in these conditions (53.6%). By contrast, Asian Americans were the least comfortable with waiting in line (36.3%) or working as a poll worker (22.7%) in the absence of social distancing. Average comfort levels by African-American and white respondents fell in between. For all groups, the level of comfort was significantly higher, often by fifteen to twenty percentage points, both for their comfort with waiting to vote and working as a poll worker when social distancing measures – such as space between voting booths, poll workers, and voters standing in line – were put in place to protect the public’s health. These findings show the paramount importance that California’s electorate places on social distancing measures for in-person voting during this pandemic, as well as how important it will be to educate the electorate about the social distancing measures that elections officials put in place.

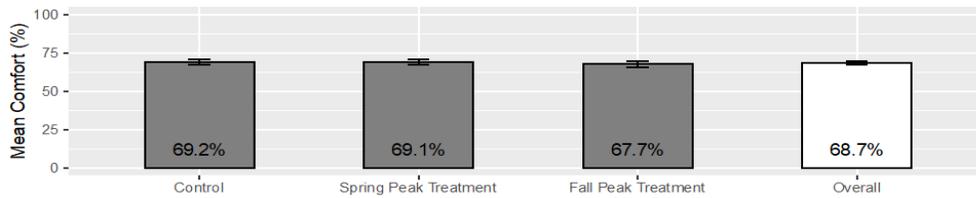


Figure 3. Level of Comfort at Polling Places with and without Social Distancing

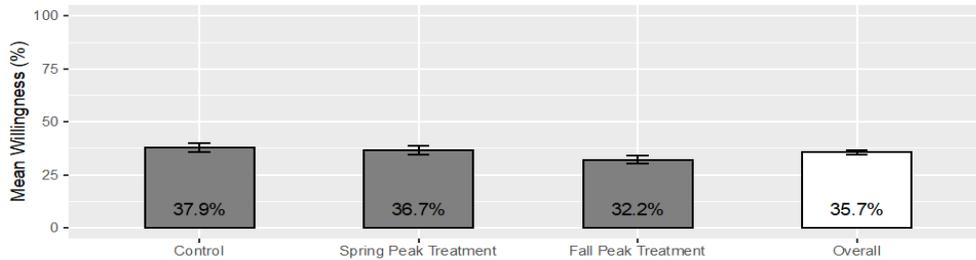
In the upcoming November 3 election, would you be comfortable waiting in line at a polling place, if there were no social distancing measures implemented at that polling place?



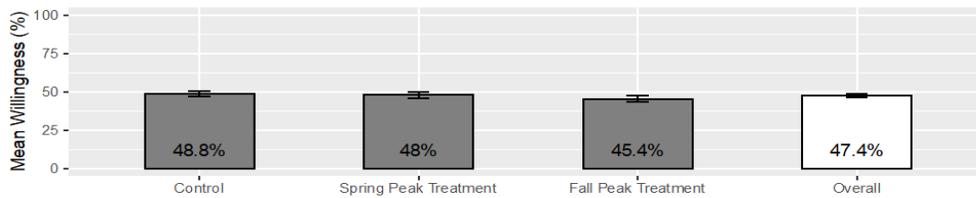
In the upcoming November 3 election, would you be comfortable waiting in line at a polling place, if the polling place was reconfigured in order to adhere to social distancing protocol, creating additional space between voting booths, poll workers, and voters standing in line, and to take other measures to protect the public's health?



In the upcoming November 3 election, would you be willing to work as a poll worker, if there were no social distancing measures implemented at that polling place?



In the upcoming November 3 election, would you be willing to work as a poll worker, if the polling place was reconfigured in order to adhere to social distancing protocol, creating additional space between voting booths, poll workers, and voters standing in line, and to take other measures to protect the public's health?



In the upcoming November 3 election, would you be comfortable dropping off your ballot at a drive-through location professionally staffed by your county elections office, if it was reconfigured in order to adhere to social distancing protocol?

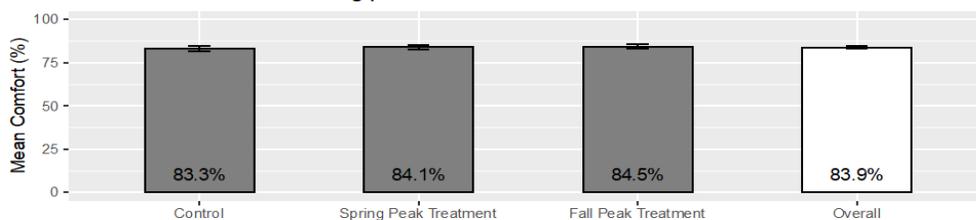
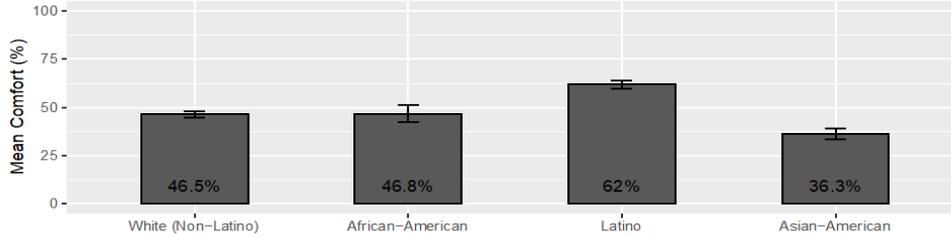


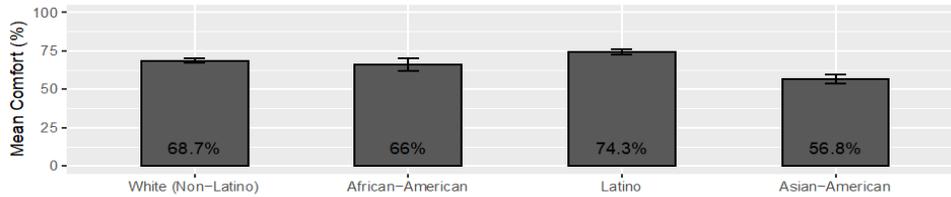


Figure 4. Comfort at Polling Places with and without Social Distancing, by race/ethnicity

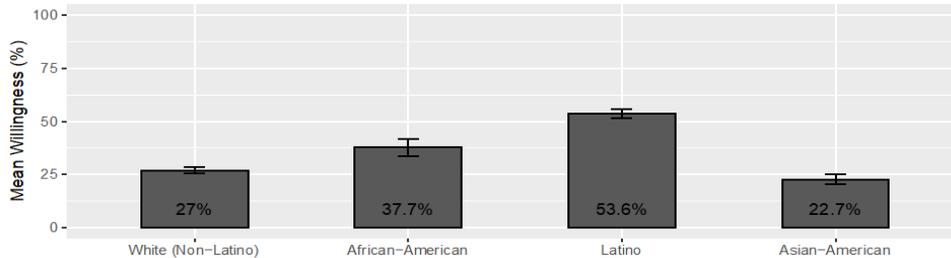
In the upcoming November 3 election, would you be comfortable waiting in line at a polling place, if there were no social distancing measures implemented at that polling place?



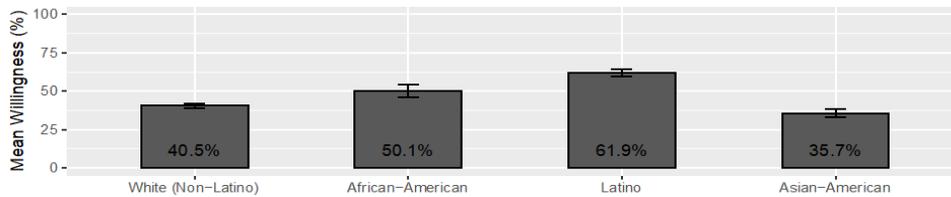
In the upcoming November 3 election, would you be comfortable waiting in line at a polling place, if the polling place was reconfigured in order to adhere to social distancing protocol, creating additional space between voting booths, poll workers, and voters standing in line, and to take other measures to protect the public's health?



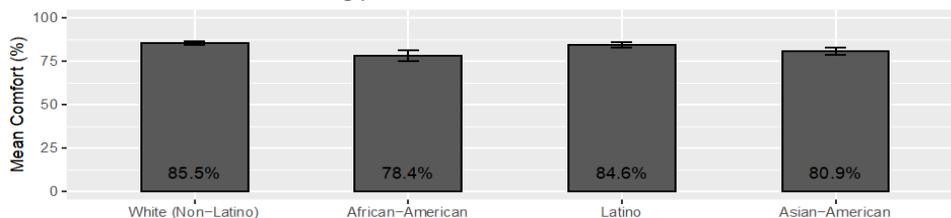
In the upcoming November 3 election, would you be willing to work as a poll worker, if there were no social distancing measures implemented at that polling place?



In the upcoming November 3 election, would you be willing to work as a poll worker, if the polling place was reconfigured in order to adhere to social distancing protocol, creating additional space between voting booths, poll workers, and voters standing in line, and to take other measures to protect the public's health?



In the upcoming November 3 election, would you be comfortable dropping off your ballot at a drive-through location professionally staffed by your county elections office, if it was reconfigured in order to adhere to social distancing protocol?



III. What Methods Make Californians Most Confident that Ballots Will Be Counted Correctly?

The two questions reported in Figure 5 ask eligible voters how confident they are that their own ballot and the ballots of others will be counted correctly if they are cast either by mail, at a polling place, or at a professionally-staffed vote center. Overall, 34.4% of Californians selected voting by mail as the method that gave them the most confidence that their own ballot would be counted correctly, and another 21.0% selected dropping off a mail ballot at a vote center or drop off box. When it came to which method provided the most confidence of the integrity of the results if *other voters* cast their ballot this way, 31.2% of respondents chose voting by mail with an additional 20.5% saying that when other voters drop off their ballots, it gave them the most confidence. These levels were similar for every COVID-19 scenario – this was an area in which our survey experiment exposing respondents to scientific projections did not yield significant effects.

Figure 5. Confidence that Ballots will be Counted Correctly

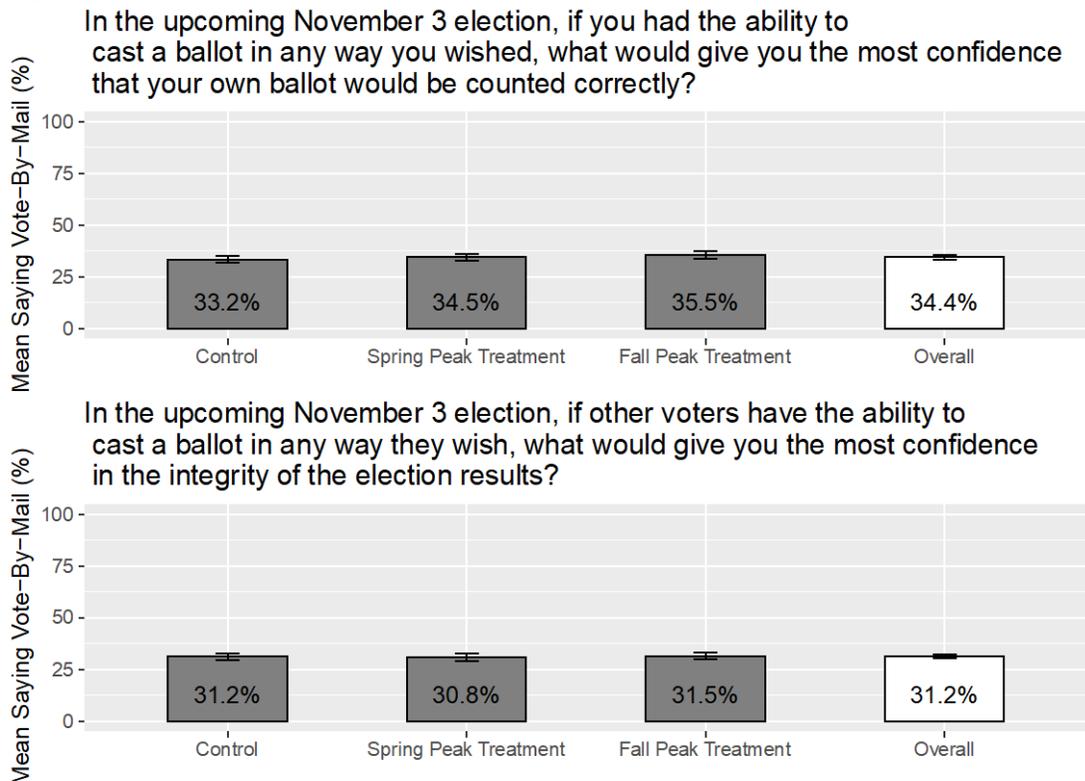
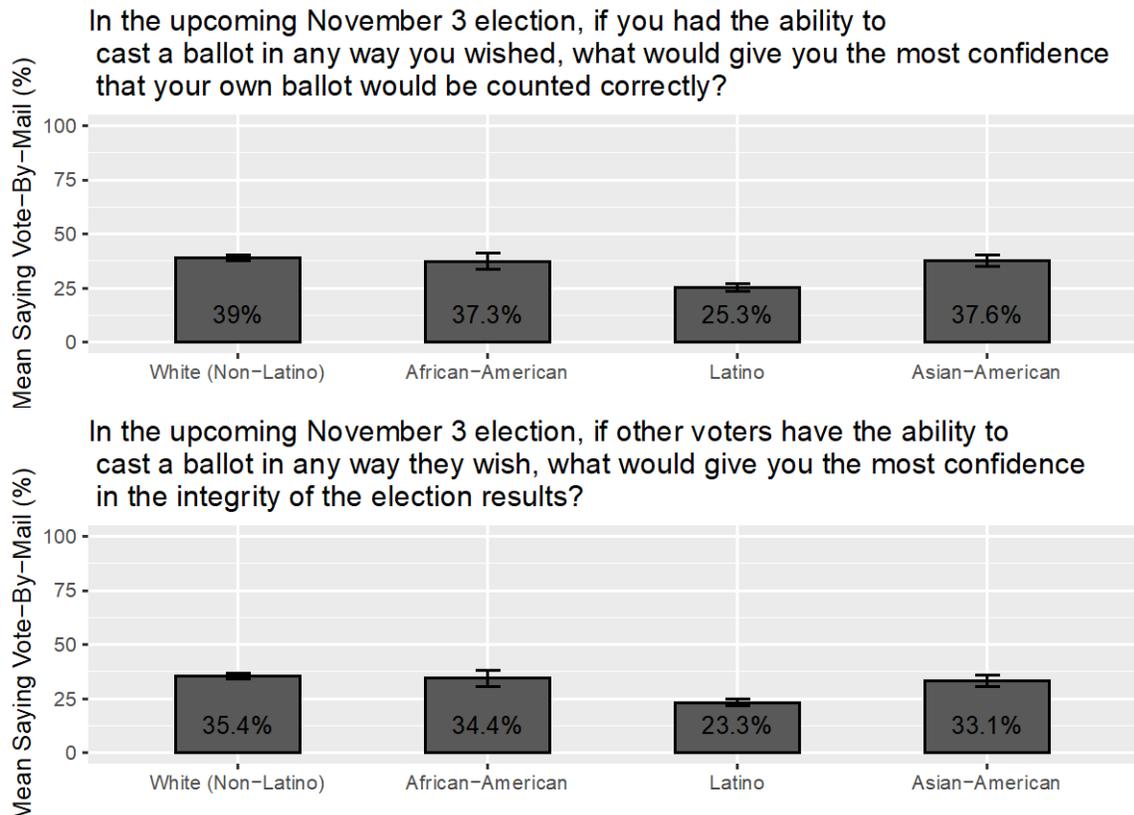


Figure 6 shows that there is one striking difference across demographic groups about which voting method gives them the most confidence. Significantly fewer Latinos (25.3%) selected voting by mail as the method that gave them the most confidence their ballots would be counted correctly, compared with Asian Americans (37.6%), African Americans (37.3%) or non-Latino whites (39.0%). Similarly, Latinos were significantly less likely than members of other groups to choose voting by mail by others as the method that gave them the most confidence in the integrity of election results. Figure 4 showed that Latinos in California were more comfortable than other groups waiting in line to vote in person or working as poll workers, and Figure 6 shows that they have more confidence in in-person voting than other groups.

Figure 6. Confidence that Ballots will be Counted Correctly, by race and ethnicity



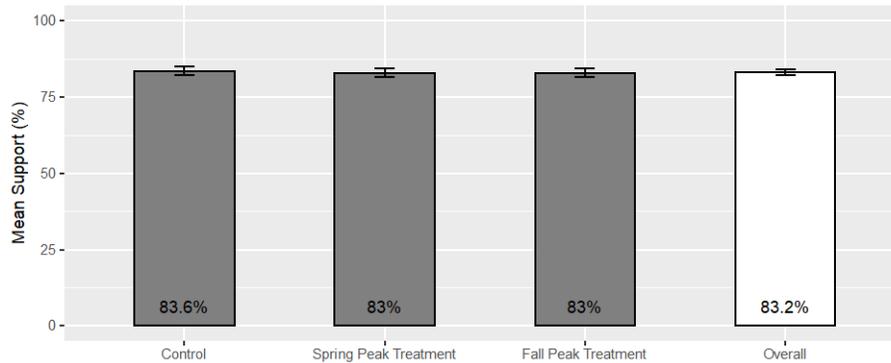
IV. What Election Policies Do Californians Support in a Pandemic?

Finally, we report how respondents viewed some of the major policy proposals that have been advanced at the national and state levels to increase opportunities to cast mail ballots in the November 2020 election. The first question asked whether they would support national legislation directing all states to send a mail ballot to any voter who requests one. While this “no-excuse absentee voting” policy has long been in place in California, voters in sixteen states must provide a valid excuse to vote absentee. Figure 7 demonstrates the strong consensus in favor of no-excuse absentee voting among Californians, with 83.2% supporting national legislation that would guarantee this opportunity to voters in every state. (For all of our policy questions, we calculate proportions based on “Yes” and “No” responses, removing “Unsure” responses. The percentage of respondents who were unsure ranged from approximately 15% to 20%, depending on the policy.) Support for this policy was strong for voters in all COVID-19 scenarios, and none of those scenarios significantly impacted support for any of the policies. Overall, 72.3% of respondents taking a position favored a national law that would require states to send a mail ballot to every voter. And a strong majority of eligible California voters (66.8%) supported national legislation that would move the November 2020 election entirely to voting by mail, without having polling places or other in-person voting.

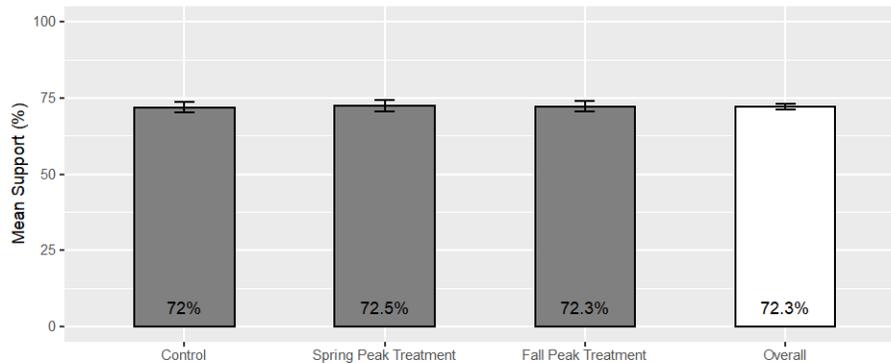
Figure 8 explores the demographic divides on these policy questions. Members of all racial and ethnic groups were strongly supportive of no-excuse absentee voting. On the question of whether to send a mail ballot to any voter who requests one, Latinos in California stood out as especially supportive of this policy, registering 78.6% support, which was six to nine percentage points higher than any other group. Finally, differences were also apparent regarding the question of

Figure 7. Policy Views on Voting by Mail

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?



For the upcoming November 3 election, would you support national legislation directing all states to send a vote by mail ballot to every voter, even if they do not request one in advance



For the upcoming November 3 election, would you support national legislation directing all states to shift entirely to voting by mail, without having polling places or other in-person voting?

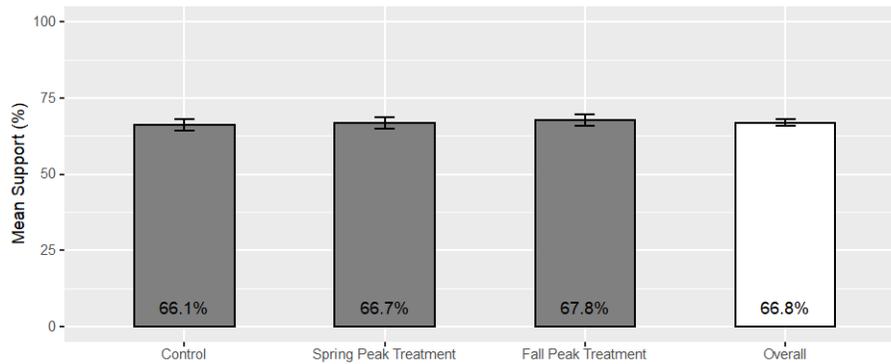
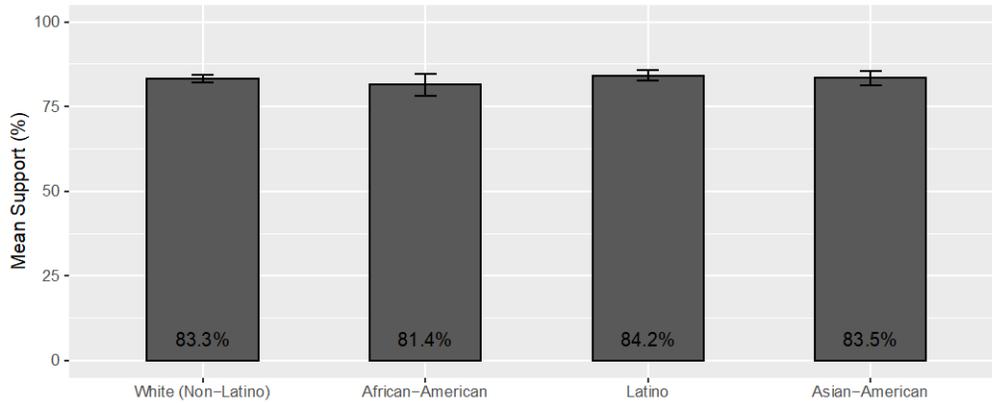


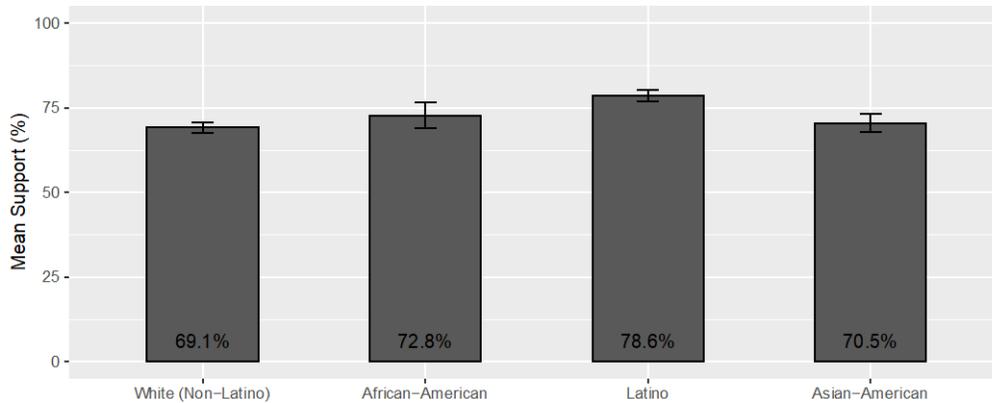


Figure 8. Policy Views on Voting by Mail, by race and ethnicity

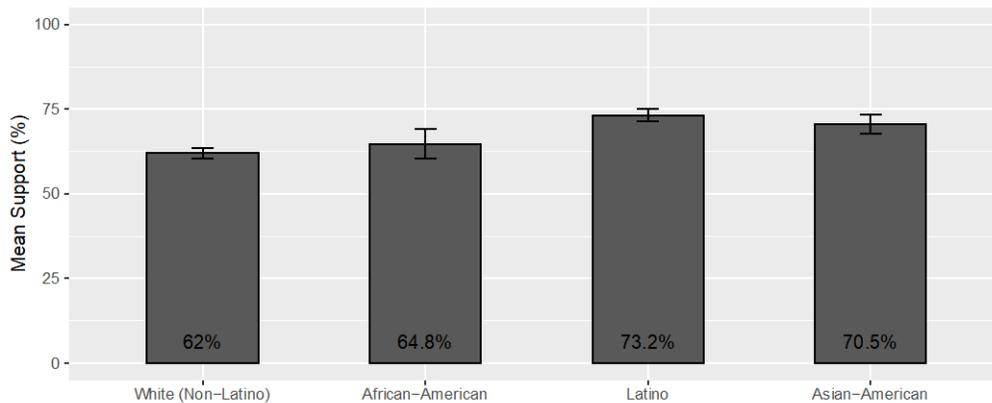
For the upcoming November 3 election, would you support national legislation directing all states to send a vote by mail ballot to any voter who requests one?



For the upcoming November 3 election, would you support national legislation directing all states to send a vote by mail ballot to every voter, even if they do not request one in advance



For the upcoming November 3 election, would you support national legislation directing all states to shift entirely to voting by mail, without having polling places or other in-person voting?



moving elections entirely to vote by mail. Support for this proposal was lowest among non-Latino whites (62%), higher among African Americans (64.8%) and Asian Americans (70.5%), and highest among Latinos (73.2%).



One intriguing pattern that emerges from our racial and ethnic breakdowns across questions are the potentially paradoxical policy views of Latino respondents, given their views on voting preferences. Consistent with past findings from the California Civic Engagement Project (2014), Latinos are less likely than non-Latino whites to prefer to vote by mail. We also find that Latinos in our study are less confident that voting by mail will lead to their ballots being counted correctly and more comfortable waiting in line at a polling place. Yet, Latinos are also more supportive of policies that allow voting by mail. Perhaps many Latino voters, who were less likely to use this mode of voting in state elections from 2002-2012 (California Civic Engagement Project 2014), are less familiar than other groups with voting by mail, but open to policies that facilitate it. Future surveys conducted after the November 2020 election – in which far more Californians in every group are likely to cast a mail ballot than in prior contests – should focus on emerging trends in how Latino eligible voters in our state view each mode of voting.

V. Conclusions

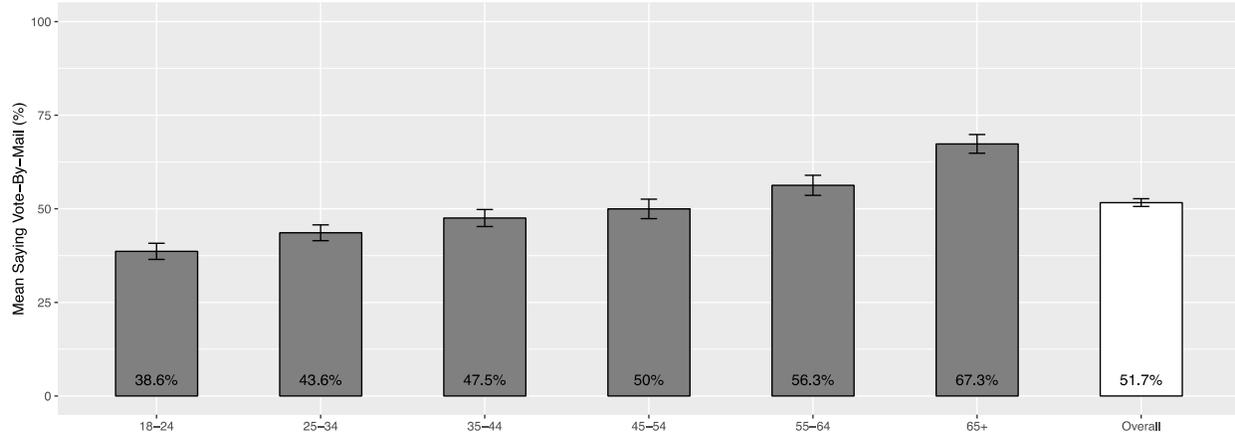
Overall, a strong majority of California's eligible electorate would prefer to cast a ballot by mail in November's election, and this is the method of voting that gives them the most confidence that their ballot and the ballots of others will be counted correctly. Still, not all Californians favor this option – choices about how to cast ballots vary significantly across the diverse racial and ethnic groups in our electorate, and some voters say that they would not participate in the election if it is conducted either exclusively through the mail or exclusively through in-person options. When thinking about in-person voting experiences, voters who read scientific projections about a scenario in which the COVID-19 crisis peaks in the fall were especially uncomfortable at the prospect of waiting in line or working at a polling place. There were also significant differences by race and ethnicity in comfort levels, but voters of all types under all scenarios became much more comfortable with casting ballots in a polling place that adheres to social distancing protocols. (In our Appendix, we present parallel analyses that explore differences across age groups.)

As policymakers and election officials plan to hold the November 2020 contest and future elections during an unprecedented public health challenge, the views of a representative sample of California's diverse electorate can help to guide their difficult choices. It is important to note that these are their survey responses, rather than measures of behavior, and whether the preferences that they expressed about how to cast ballots shapes their participation will be revealed in November, 2020.

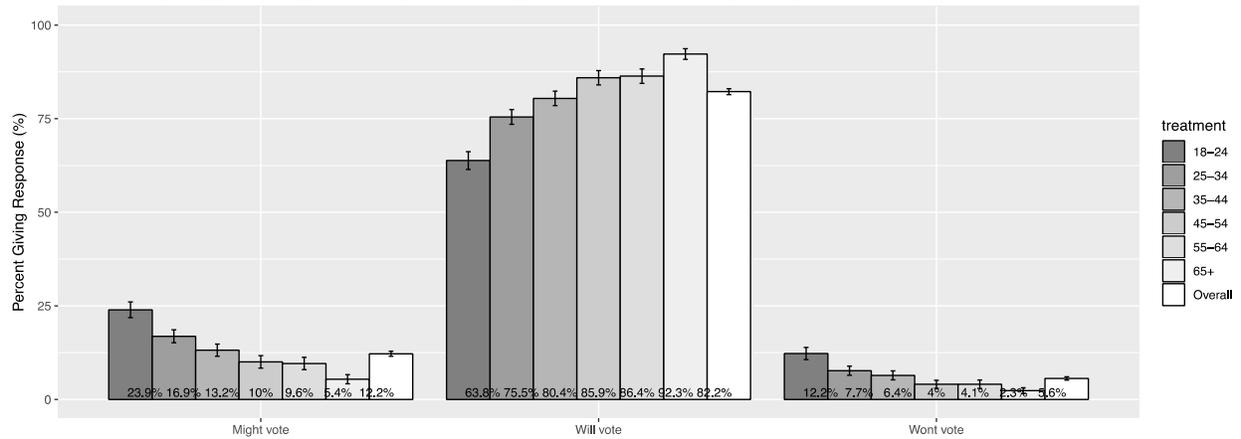


Appendix

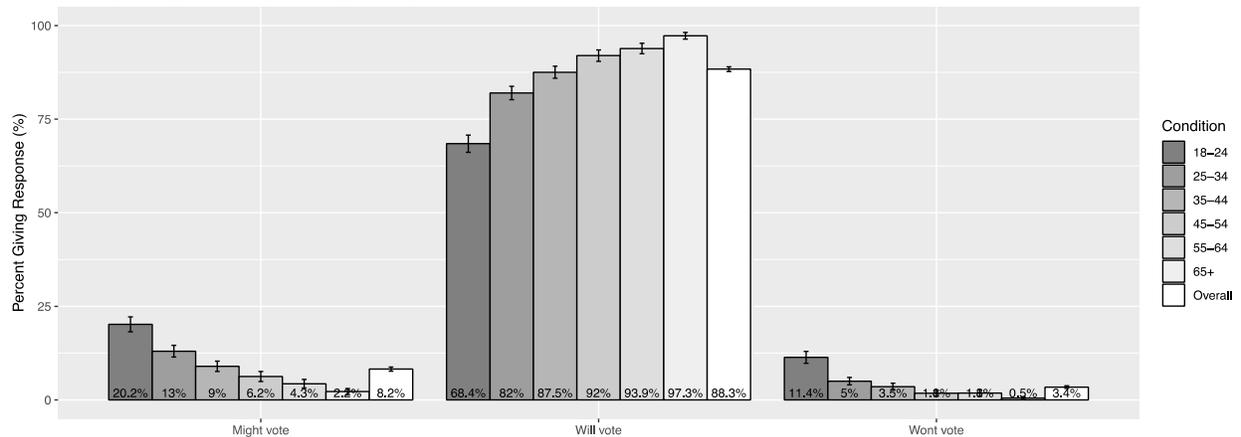
In the upcoming November 3 election, if you had the ability to cast a ballot in any way you wished, what would be your most preferred way to cast a ballot?



Q In the upcoming November 3 election, if your only option to cast a ballot in your county was an in-person option such as a traditional polling place or a professionally staffed county elections office, how likely would you be to cast a ballot?

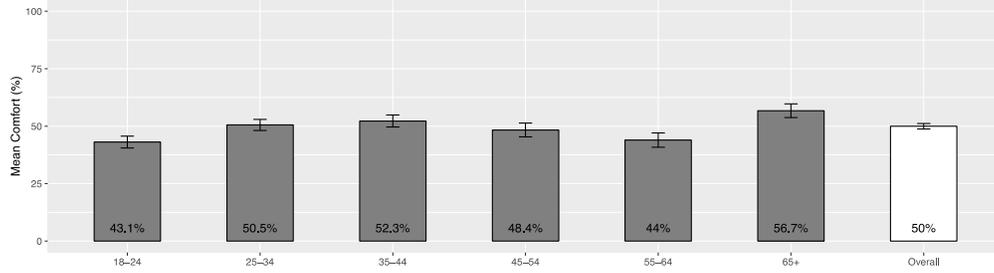


In the upcoming November 3 election, if your only option to cast a ballot in your county was to vote by mailing in a ballot, how likely would you be to cast a ballot?

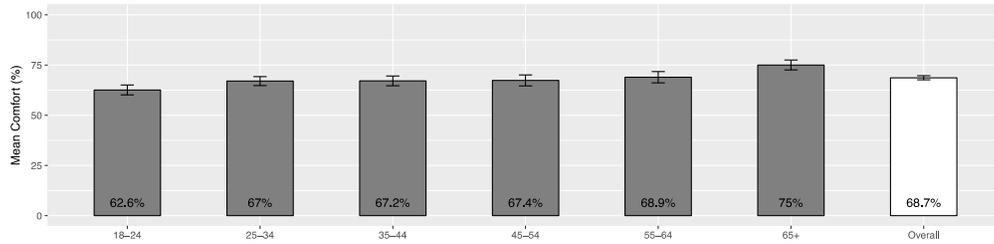




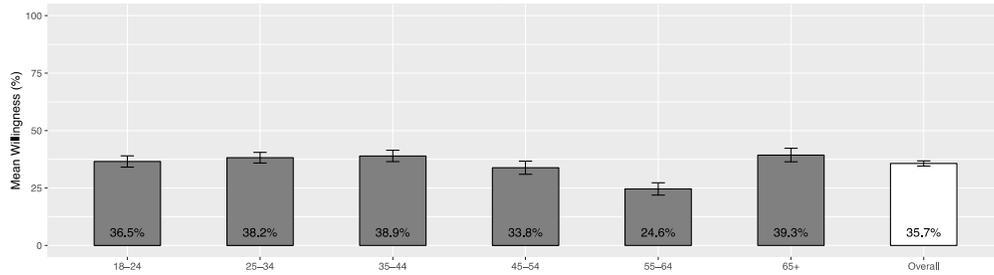
In the upcoming November 3 election, would you be comfortable waiting in line at a polling place, if there were no social distancing measures implemented at that polling place?



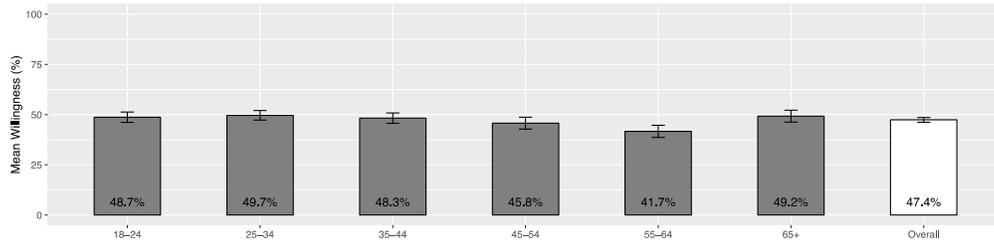
In the upcoming November 3 election, would you be comfortable waiting in line at a polling place, if the polling place was reconfigured in order to adhere to social distancing protocol, creating additional space between voting booths, poll workers, and voters standing in line, and to take other measures to protect the public's health?



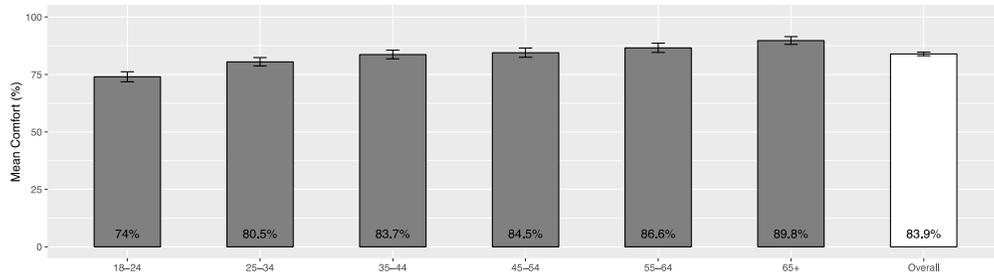
In the upcoming November 3 election, would you be willing to work as a poll worker, if there were no social distancing measures implemented at that polling place?



In the upcoming November 3 election, would you be willing to work as a poll worker, if the polling place was reconfigured in order to adhere to social distancing protocol, creating additional space between voting booths, poll workers, and voters standing in line, and to take other measures to protect the public's health?



In the upcoming November 3 election, would you be comfortable dropping off your ballot at a drive-through location professionally staffed by your county elections office, if it was reconfigured in order to adhere to social distancing protocol?





References

Bowden, John, 2020. "Klobuchar, Wyden call for expanded mail-in and early voting amid coronavirus outbreak." *The Hill* March 16, 2020.

California Citizens Engagement Project. 2014. "Disparities in California's Vote-by-Mail Use," CCEP Issue Brief #1, March 2014, available at <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57b8c7ce15d5dbf599fb46ab/t/58e58499e4fcb5fc935614c6/1491436758841/VBM+Issue+Brief+Revised.pdf>.

California Secretary of State, 2016. "Voter Participation Statistics by County." Accessed at <https://elections.cdn.sos.ca.gov/sov/2016-general/sov/03-voter-participation-stats-by-county.pdf>

California Secretary of State, 2020. "Report of Registration as of February 18, 2020." Accessed at <https://elections.cdn.sos.ca.gov/ror/15day-presprim-2020/county.pdf>.

Coppock, Alexander and Oliver A. McClellan. 2019. "Validating the Demographic, Political, Psychological, and Experimental Results Obtained from a New Source of Online Survey Respondents." *Research & Politics*. 6(1) DOI: 2053168018822174

Corasaniti, Nick, and Stephanie Saul. 2020. "Sixteen States have Postponed Primaries During the Pandemic. Here's a List," *The New York Times*, August 10, 2020.

Hasen, Richard L. 2020. "Trump is Wrong About the Dangers of Absentee Ballots," *The Washington Post*, April 9, 2020,

NAACP, 2020. "Voter Access and Participation During the Coronavirus Pandemic." Available at <https://naacp.org/coronavirus/voter-access-and-participation-during-coronavirus-pandemic/>

Persily, Nathaniel and Charles Stewart III, 2020. "Ten Recommendations to Assure a Healthy and Trustworthy 2020 Election," Lawfare.com, March 19, 2020.

Rabinowitz, Kate and Brittany Renee Mayes, 2020. "At Least 83% of American Voters Can Cast Ballots by Mail in the Fall," *The Washington Post* September 25, 2020. Accessed at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/politics/vote-by-mail-states/>

United States Census Bureau, 2016. "Citizen Voting Age Population. Selected Characteristics. California." Accessed at https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/visualizations/2016/comm/citizen_voting_age_pop/cb160-tps148_california.jpg



RESEARCH

MESSAGING MATTERS: HOW INFORMATION ABOUT UNDERREPRESENTATION AFFECTS THE POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF RACIAL AND ETHNIC GROUPS IN CALIFORNIA

Cheryl Boudreau, (UC Davis)

Jennifer L. Merolla (UC Riverside), and Sono Shah (Pew Research Center)

Abstract: Can racial and ethnic minorities be mobilized to participate in politics at greater rates? We theorize that mobilization messages providing information about a group's underrepresentation in government may increase participation among racial/ethnic minorities. However, responsiveness to such messages should vary depending on individuals' prior awareness of their group's underrepresentation. Using a two-wave panel survey that randomly assigned different get out the vote messages, we find that messages highlighting a racial/ethnic group's underrepresentation in government do not increase Latinos', Blacks', or Asians' likelihood of voting. We also find that such messages can decrease other forms of political participation among Asians and Latinos who were previously unaware of their group's underrepresentation. These findings indicate that information about underrepresentation can actually demobilize certain segments of the electorate. Thus, practical efforts to boost participation among underrepresented groups should either communicate information about underrepresentation in other ways or provide a different type of message altogether.

Funding Acknowledgment: We are grateful to the University of California Office of the President's Multicampus Research Program for providing funding for this survey through the MRP-17-454899 grant.

Can racial and ethnic minorities be mobilized to participate in politics at greater rates? For decades, scholars and practitioners have expressed concern about the unrepresentativeness of the electorate (relative to the general population) and the consequences it might have for democratic accountability. These concerns are particularly acute in states like California, where growing racial/ethnic diversity in the population is not reflected in rates of political participation. For example, a recent report from the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) shows that 60% of likely voters in California are white, even though California's population is only 42% white. Conversely, California's population is 36% Latino, yet only 18% of the state's likely voters are Latino (PPIC 2016). These "participation gaps" among different racial/ethnic groups are consequential, given differences in these groups' policy priorities and political preferences (e.g., Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo, 1997; Matsuoka and Junn 2013). As such, politically interested groups, get out the vote (GOTV) organizations, and states themselves have invested considerable resources in boosting the political participation of underrepresented groups.



Yet, we still know little about how different types of mobilization messages affect racial and ethnic minorities. Indeed, existing studies offer conflicting conclusions about whether targeted group-based messages are more effective than standard get out the vote messages among racial and ethnic minorities. On the one hand, several studies show that the particular message used in mobilization campaigns does not seem to matter as much as the mode of delivery (e.g., in person, over the phone). Any message that encourages members of the general population to vote seems to have a similar effect in increasing the likelihood of participation (for a review see Green and Gerber 2015). In contrast, other studies find that the nature of the message does seem to matter for mobilization, at least among certain groups like young people and Latinos (Green and Vavreck 2008; Valenzuela and Michelson 2016). These findings are also consistent with survey and lab experimental work on messaging and engagement (e.g., DeFrancesco Soto and Merolla 2006; Merolla et al. 2013), as well as studies of ethnic group endorsements (Boudreau, Elmendorf, and MacKenzie 2019). These studies offer reason to believe that how GOTV messages are communicated might matter for increasing the participation of underrepresented groups.

In this study, we examine whether mobilization messages that provide information about the underrepresentation of one's racial/ethnic group in government are effective at increasing political participation. Such messages are communicated in real-world elections. For example, during the 2018 election, iamavoter.com had a billboard on route 60 East in Southern California that pointed out the exact underrepresentation of women in government, stating that "over 50% of the United States is female, but only 20% of Congress is female." Racial and ethnic minorities are similarly underrepresented in government, relative to their presence in the population.

However, scholars have yet to study whether and when messages that provide information about a group's underrepresentation effectively increase political participation among racial and ethnic minorities. It is possible that receiving information about the extent to which one's racial/ethnic group is underrepresented in government may cause individuals to conclude that more people from their group need to participate, at least as a first step in improving representation. However, the effectiveness of such information may vary across individuals within a particular racial/ethnic group. If one of the key ways such information works is by individuals being exposed to and learning new information, then we might expect the information to more effectively increase participation among individuals who were previously unaware of their group's underrepresentation in government.

In what follows, we examine whether and to what extent racial and ethnic minorities are aware of their group's underrepresentation in government. Our results reveal that a nontrivial percentage of Black, Latino, and Asian respondents are unaware of their group's underrepresentation. We then assess the effects of being exposed to a message that informs them of their group's underrepresentation. We find that such information has no effect on Blacks', Latinos', or Asians' likelihood of voting. While the information increases Blacks' willingness to engage in other forms of political participation, it can actually decrease participation among Latinos and Asians. Together, these results indicate that messages highlighting a racial/ethnic group's underrepresentation in government can have unintended demobilizing effects on certain segments of the electorate. This suggests that practical efforts to boost participation among underrepresented groups should either communicate information about a group's underrepresentation in other ways or provide a different type of message altogether.



Closing Participation Gaps:

Scholars and practitioners have explored a wide range of factors that contribute to participation gaps in the electorate, especially among racial and ethnic groups. Some of the factors that intensify participation gaps among racial and ethnic minorities are lower levels of socio-economic resources (e.g., Bobo and Gilliam 1990; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Leighley and Nagler 2013; but see Fraga 2018), language barriers among some immigrant-rooted communities (e.g., DeSipio 1996; Hero and Campbell 1996), along with limited political socialization in the U.S. context (e.g., Hajnal and Lee 2001; Lee, Ramakrishnan and Ramirez 2006). Scholars have also identified various institutional attempts at voter suppression (e.g., Barreto, Nuño, and Sanchez 2009; Hajnal, Lajevardi, and Nielson 2017; Sobel and Smith 2009; but see Grimmer et al., 2018), and limited mobilization by campaigns and organizations (e.g., García Bedolla and Michelson 2012; Lee, Ramakrishnan and Ramirez 2006; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993) as factors that exacerbate participation gaps among racial and ethnic minorities. On this last factor, one effective way to help close such gaps is by boosting the mobilization efforts of campaigns and organizations. Scholars have found that when racial and ethnic minorities are encouraged to participate by campaigns, organizations, or churches, they are more likely to do so (e.g., García Bedolla and Michelson 2012; Ramirez 2007; Verba, Brady and Schlozman 1995; Wong 2005). But, what types of get out the vote (GOTV) messages are most effective in getting racial and ethnic minorities to engage in politics?

A long line of literature in persuasion (as well as marketing) indicates that the message used in a GOTV appeal should matter, but that it may not matter in the same way for all individuals, or all groups. For one, research on persuasion in social psychology finds that information is more likely to be processed systematically and have lasting effects when individuals are more motivated to process that information (e.g., Petty and Cacioppo 1996; Chen and Chaiken 1999). However, individuals are not equally motivated to process information in a given GOTV appeal. Rather, motivation to process a message may depend on the characteristics of the message itself and how they relate to the individual; the more relevant a message is for a person, the more likely she should be to process the information carefully and systematically (Petty, Cacioppo, and Goldman 1981). Some of the more important indicators of relevance are when a message is high in personal importance, for example related to something the individual cares about or is linked to one's identity (e.g., Johnson and Eagly 1989). We might therefore expect to find that, on average, a GOTV appeal that invokes a group one identifies with will be more likely to capture one's attention, and be processed, than a standard GOTV appeal. As a result, a group-based GOTV message should be more likely to increase political participation than an appeal that uses a standard get out the vote script or appeals to some other civic duty.

Some examples of GOTV appeals that may be more relevant to racial and ethnic minorities are those that invoke an individual's racial or ethnic identity, or focus on issues of concern to the group. Existing research has explored the effects of identity-based appeals in GOTV messages and has found some empirical support for the theory that group-based messages may effectively mobilize racial and ethnic minorities (Panagopoulous and Green 2008; Abrajano 2010; DeFrancesco Soto and Merolla 2006; Valenzuela and Michelson 2016).

Here we focus on a novel group-based appeal that has not been explored in the literature. Specifically, we examine a group-based appeal that contains factual information about the extent to which a



group is represented in the political system. Existing work suggests that individuals are more likely to feel empowered and participate in politics as their group is better represented in government (Bobo and Gilliam 1990). Part of the mechanism underlying this effect is that individuals may be more trusting of descriptive representatives (Williams 1998) and inclined to think that they will be more responsive to their needs (Mansbridge 1999). Using observational data, several scholars have found linkages between having a descriptive representative and increased turnout among African Americans (Tate 2003; but see Gay 2001; and Griffin and Keane 2006 for more nuanced findings) and Latinos (Barreto 2007; Rocha et al 2010; but others have found more mixed support; see, for example, Fraga 2016). But, how might racial and ethnic minorities react to a GOTV appeal like the one noted in the introduction, which provides information about their group's underrepresentation in government?

Being exposed to a message about the underrepresentation of one's racial/ethnic group in government is likely to first draw one's attention since it is high in relevance. As individuals have the motivation to more carefully process the information, it may lead them to think more in depth about this issue. They may draw the conclusion that more people from their group need to participate, at least as a first step in improving representation. Once a group turns out in higher numbers, it may signal to prospective candidates likely support if they run for office, thereby improving representation in the long-term. This was likely what the organization iamavoter.com had in mind when they posted the billboard about the underrepresentation of women in U.S. government. It signals a need for more women to become involved in politics, through voting and other types of political participation. Of course, the effectiveness of information about underrepresentation may vary across individuals within a group. If one of the key ways in which such information works is by individuals being exposed to and learning new information (Druckman and Leeper 2012), then we might expect the information to more effectively increase participation among individuals who are unaware of the underrepresentation of their group in government.

Study Design:

To measure racial and ethnic minorities' awareness of their group's underrepresentation in government and examine how information about it affects their participation in politics, we conducted a two-wave online panel survey of eligible citizens ages 18 and up with an embedded experiment. The first wave of the survey was fielded from October 15th to October 28th, 2018. About seven to ten days after wave 1, respondents were invited to complete the second wave of the survey, which was fielded from October 24th to November 4, 2018, just before Election Day (November 6, 2018). Our sample consists of Latinos, Blacks, and Asians in California, supplemented with a national sample of Asians and Blacks (total sample size is 2,216: See Table A1 in the Appendix for sample characteristics).¹

In the first wave of the survey, all respondents were asked basic demographic questions, including one that measures their racial/ethnic identity. Respondents were then asked questions that measure their beliefs about the extent to which their racial/ethnic group is represented in the population at large and in the legislature. Specifically, all respondents were asked to estimate what percentage of the U.S. population their racial/ethnic group comprises. Respondents were also asked to estimate

¹ The survey included 1,354 Californian respondents, and 862 respondents who resided in other states.



what percentage of members of the U.S. Congress belongs to their racial/ethnic group. California respondents were also asked these questions for the California population and the California state legislature. These questions allow us to measure respondents' prior beliefs about the representational status of their group. We ask these questions in the first wave of the survey (which was administered approximately one week before the second wave) to ensure that we do not reveal the purpose of the experiment embedded in the second wave, and to ensure that we do not prime identity or representation issues in that wave.

In the second wave, we re-contacted these respondents and randomly assigned them to receive different types of messages before expressing their likelihood of voting and engaging in other forms of political participation. In the control group, respondents receive a message that encourages them to perform a civic duty other than voting. Specifically, they receive a message from "California Recycles" (or whatever state they live in for the supplemental national sample) that reminds them that Earth Day happens every April and emphasizes that their responsibilities as a citizen include recycling. They are also given information about who to contact if they have questions about recycling. This message provides an important benchmark against which the effects of different types of get out the vote (GOTV) messages can be compared (See the Appendix for the full scripts).

In the "standard GOTV message" group, respondents receive a message that is similar to the control group message, but it encourages voting instead of recycling. In particular, respondents receive a message from "The Voter Project" that reminds them of the election in November and emphasizes that their rights as a citizen include voting. They are also given information about who to contact if they have questions about voting. This type of message is commonly used in GOTV research, and it allows us to assess the effects that a standard voting message has on respondents' likelihood of voting and other forms of participation, relative to the recycling message.

In the "underrepresentation message" group, respondents receive a message that encourages them to vote by conveying information about the underrepresentation of their racial/ethnic group in government. The message is attributed to an organization associated with respondents' race/ethnicity (e.g., "The Latino Voter Project" for Latino respondents) and provides factual information about the percentage of respondents' own racial/ethnic group in the legislature versus in the population. For example, Latino respondents in California read, "Many citizens are concerned with the underrepresentation of Latinos in government. While Latinos make up 39 percent of the California population, they only hold 22.5 percent of the seats in Sacramento. It is important to have more Latino elected officials, since they are more likely to put issues on the agenda and help pass policies that affect the Latino community." The messages for Black and Asian respondents similarly convey that their racial/ethnic group is underrepresented in the legislature.² This group allows us to examine how

² Black respondents, as well as Asian respondents from outside of California, receive information about the underrepresentation of their racial/ethnic group in the U.S. Congress, relative to their percentage in the U.S. population. All of the data on representation was truthful, based on census data on the presence of each group in California or the national level (depending on the sample) compared to their presence in either the California state legislature or the U.S. Congress at the time the study was fielded. In the analyses that follow, we pool the responses from California and non-California respondents among Asians and Blacks. Due to sample size limitations, we are unable to estimate these results separately.



a message that provides information about underrepresentation compares to the standard GOTV or recycling message.

After receiving one of these messages, respondents are asked to report the likelihood that they will vote in the 2018 general election (response options include “not at all likely,” “somewhat likely,” “likely,” or “very likely”).³ We also gave them the opportunity to fill out a postcard to express their views to their U.S. senators. If they choose to do so, then they are asked to convey which policy issues should be at the top of the political agenda and are given an opportunity to write a message to their senators.⁴ This measure allows us to examine whether respondents are actually willing to engage in a particular form of political participation above and beyond voting. We also include a self-report measure that asks respondents how likely they are to participate in the following political activities in the next 12 months: 1) contacting a government official to express their policy views, 2) donating money to a campaign, 3) attending a meeting of a town or city government or school board, and 4) joining a protest, march, rally or demonstration. Response options for each form of participation include “not at all likely,” “somewhat likely,” “likely,” or “very likely.” We combined these responses into a participation index ($\alpha = .85$). We examine whether the underrepresentation message increases these types of political participation among racial and ethnic minorities, relative to the standard GOTV message and the recycling message. We also assess whether the effects of the underrepresentation message vary depending on respondents’ prior awareness of their group’s underrepresentation in government.

Results:

Our results reveal important variation in respondents’ awareness of their racial/ethnic group’s underrepresentation in government. To measure awareness of such underrepresentation, we use respondents’ answers to the wave 1 survey questions that asked them to estimate the percentage of their racial/ethnic group in the population and in the legislature. Respondents who report a smaller percentage of their racial/ethnic group in the legislature than in the population are considered to be aware of the underrepresentation of their group in government. Conversely, respondents who report a greater percentage of their racial/ethnic group in the legislature than in the population are considered to be unaware of their group’s underrepresentation in government.⁵ We find that a sizeable majority of Latino, Black, and Asian respondents are already aware of their racial/ethnic group’s underrepresentation in government. However, a nontrivial percentage of these respondents are not. Specifically, 17 percent of Asians, 21 percent of Blacks, and 16 percent of Latinos are unaware of their group’s underrepresentation in government.

³ We also asked if they had already voted. In the analysis of this measure, we only include those who have not yet voted.

⁴ Respondents were told that their messages would be sent to their senators, which is truthful information. At the end of the study, respondents were debriefed about the groups used in the study, learning that while they are analogous to actual organizations, they were created by the researchers for purposes of the study.

⁵ Those who reported the same percentage were also coded as unaware of underrepresentation.

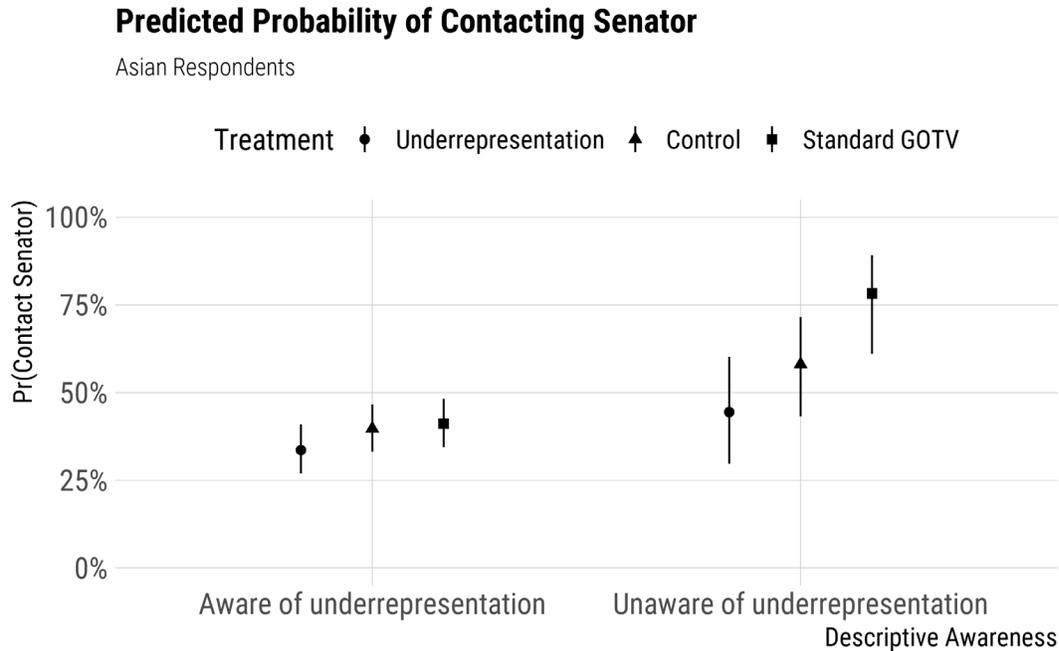


The variation in respondents' prior beliefs enables us to test whether information about their racial/ethnic group's underrepresentation in government induces learning among those who were previously unaware of it and boosts their participation as a result. To do so, we regress each of our dependent variables (likelihood of voting, probability of contacting one's senator, willingness to engage in other forms of political participation) on a dummy variable for the "underrepresentation message" treatment group, as well as an interaction between this treatment group variable and a dummy variable that indicates whether respondents were aware of their group's underrepresentation. In one model, the omitted category is the control group, while in the other it is the "standard GOTV message" group. The full regression results are in Tables A3-A5 in the Appendix.⁶ Here, we illustrate the relevant findings for each dependent variable in figures.

With respect to the likelihood of voting, we do not find any significant effects for the underrepresentation message, regardless of Latino, Black, and Asian respondents' awareness of their group's underrepresentation in government. The results for contacting one's senators show that, if anything, information about the underrepresentation of one's group in government *reduces* the likelihood of contacting one's senators, especially among those previously unaware of their group's underrepresentation. In general, Latinos and Asians who were previously unaware of their group's underrepresentation in government are more likely to contact their senators in the control and standard GOTV message conditions (relative to their counterparts who are already aware of their group's underrepresentation). However, this probability decreases when they learn that their group is underrepresented in government. For example, Figure 1 shows that the underrepresentation message significantly reduces the probability that Asians who are unaware of their group's underrepresentation will contact their senators, relative to their counterparts in the standard GOTV message condition (a reduction from 0.78 in the standard GOTV message condition to 0.44 in the underrepresentation treatment; $p < 0.05$).

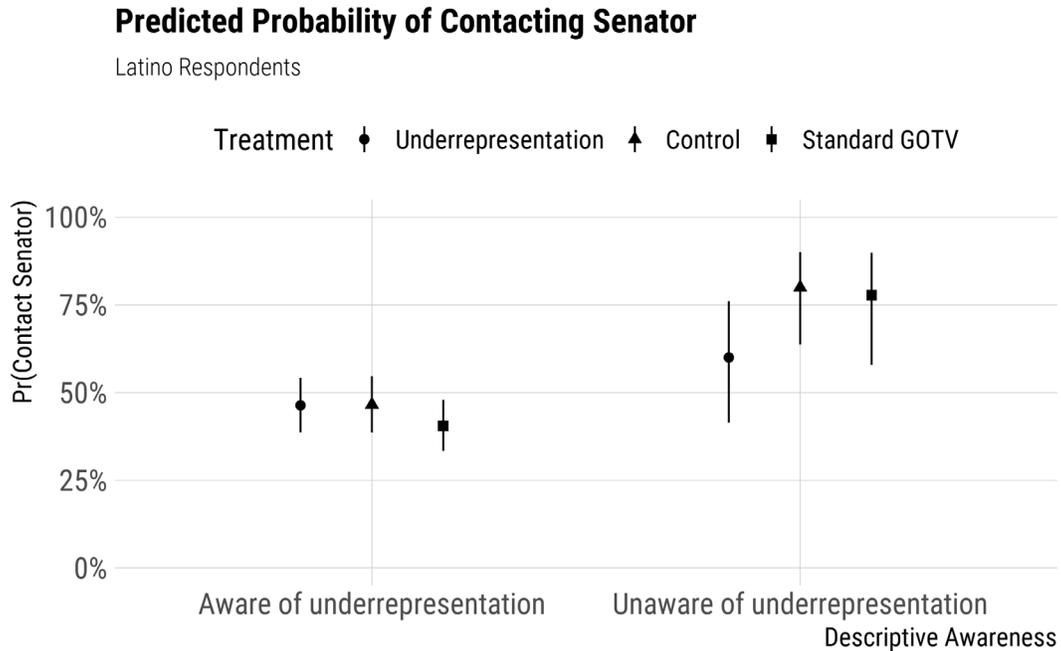
⁶ Our study included two additional group-based messages, one about the respondents' identification with their state and the other with their race/ethnicity. Our analyses include variables for these treatment groups, but we explore those results more in-depth in a separate paper. Participants were balanced on a variety of demographic factors and political dispositions across these experimental conditions (see the Appendix, Table A2).

Figure 1



The results in Figure 2 show a similar pattern for Latinos, relative to the control group, though the effect is outside of conventional significance levels. Specifically, the underrepresentation treatment decreases the probability that Latinos who are unaware of their group’s underrepresentation will contact their senators from 0.80 in the control group to 0.60 in the underrepresentation treatment ($p = 0.14$). Learning that your group is underrepresented in government therefore leads to behavior that more closely mirrors the behavior of those who were already aware of their group’s underrepresentation in government. We do not however find any significant effects among Blacks who are aware versus unaware of their group’s underrepresentation.

Figure 2



The effects of the underrepresentation message on respondents' willingness to engage in other forms of political participation are mixed. On the one hand, the underrepresentation treatment increases participation among Blacks who were previously unaware of their group's underrepresentation (10.24 on the participation index), relative to their counterparts in both the control (8.94; $p = 0.126$) and standard GOTV message (8.45; $p < 0.05$) conditions (see Figure 3).⁷ However, Figure 4 shows that this same treatment decreases participation among Latinos who were aware of their group's underrepresentation by about 1 unit on the participation index relative to their

⁷ Disaggregating the participation index into its component behaviors suggests that the underrepresentation treatment increases these respondents' participation the most in terms of their likelihood of attending a local government meeting (relative to the standard GOTV message) and attending a protest (relative to the control). However, these differences are smaller than the aggregated index results.

Figure 3

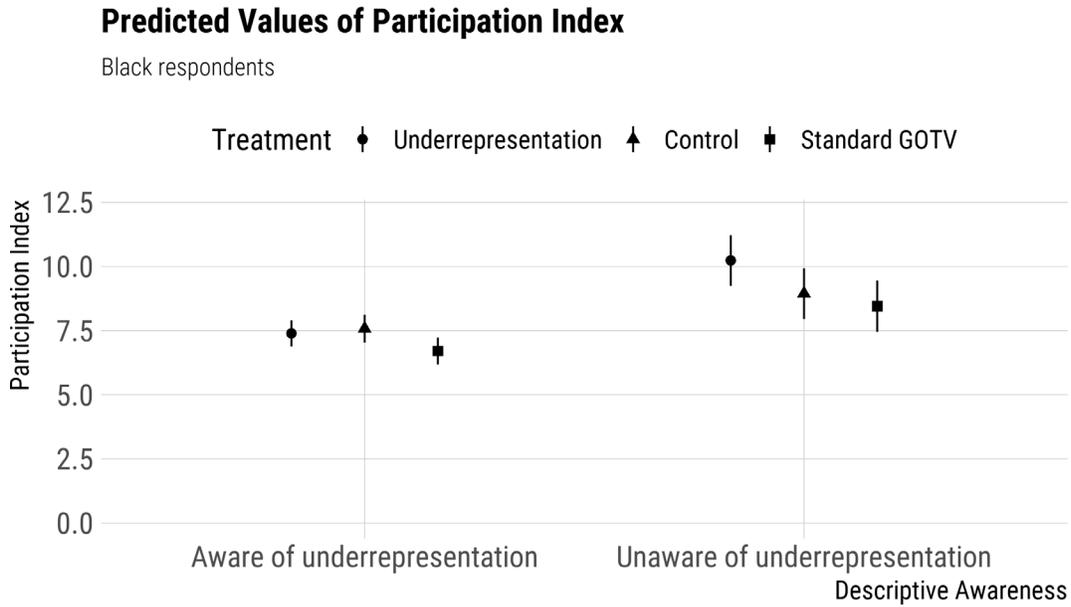
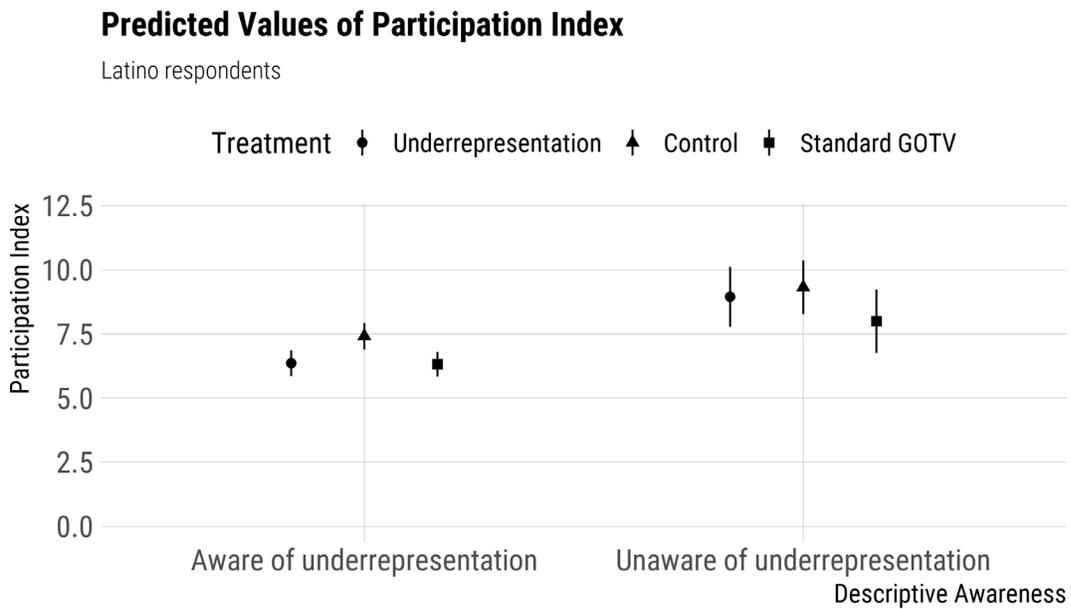


Figure 4





counterparts in the control group ($p=0.02$).⁸ We do not observe significant effects among Asians who are aware versus unaware of their group's underrepresentation.

Conclusion

The results of our study show that messages highlighting the underrepresentation of one's racial/ethnic group can, under certain conditions, demobilize segments of the electorate. For Asians and Latinos, we find that this information can reduce the likelihood of contacting one's senators among those who were previously unaware of their group's underrepresentation. It can also reduce other forms of participation among Latinos who were aware of their group's underrepresentation. Rather than motivating individuals to become more engaged (perhaps to try to change their group's underrepresentation), the information appears to discourage them from doing so. This result is troubling because these respondents initially had higher levels of participation than those who were already aware of their group's underrepresentation. In some instances, learning about their group's underrepresentation reduced their levels of participation down to the lower levels among those who were already aware of their group's underrepresentation. However, this same information boosted other forms of political participation among Blacks who were previously unaware of their group's underrepresentation in government.

These findings have important implications for the scholarly literature on political mobilization and for practical efforts to boost participation among members of underrepresented groups. While groups like iamavoter.com have invested considerable resources in billboards and other materials that advertise groups' underrepresentation in government, there has been little empirical study of the effects of such messages. Our study is one exception, and it indicates that messages of this sort may be counterproductive for two reasons. First, many racial/ethnic minorities are already aware of the underrepresentation of their group in government. These individuals have lower levels of political participation to begin with and are unaffected by messages conveying information that they already possess. Second, for those who were previously unaware of their group's underrepresentation, learning about it may make them less (not more) inclined to participate in politics. The one exception to this pattern occurs among Blacks, who became more likely to participate in certain political activities when they learned about their group's underrepresentation in government.

A possible explanation for the different results we observe among Blacks may stem from their higher level of perceived group commonality and linked fate, relative to Latinos and Asians (Sanchez and Vargas 2016). The stronger attachments that Blacks tend to have to their group may induce them to respond in a more positive manner to the information about their group's underrepresentation. That is, instead of becoming demobilized in response to such information, they may become motivated to try to increase their group's representation in government. While future research on the source of these different results among racial/ethnic groups is needed, our results demonstrate that the effects of information about underrepresentation vary both within and across groups. Thus, more targeted efforts to disseminate such information (e.g., via the mail or through canvassing, as opposed to on

⁸ Interestingly, disaggregating the participation index suggests that the underrepresentation treatment decreases these respondents' participation the most in terms of their likelihood of donating money to a campaign and attending a political meeting (relative to the control), though these differences are small.



billboards) may make this type of message more effective. It is therefore imperative to test new GOTV messages with each targeted group before fielding them to a broad cross-section of the electorate, since some messages may have mixed, and unintended, effects.

Our study raises new questions that future research on this topic should explore. For one, it is important to examine whether there are other kinds of information about representation that will lead to mobilization rather than demobilization. Learning about the underrepresentation of one's racial/ethnic group in government may have depressed participation since individuals may have felt that non-descriptive representatives would be less responsive to their interests (see Broockman and Butler 2011 for some evidence that this may be the case). This may explain, for example, why some respondents were less likely to contact their senators upon learning that their group is underrepresented in government. The information about underrepresentation might also have led respondents to believe that they can do little to alter the supply of candidates that share their race/ethnicity, thereby inducing them not to vote and engage in other forms of political participation. Another potential explanation for the demobilizing effects we observe is that the information might have inadvertently conveyed that one's racial/ethnic group is underrepresented in government because members of their group typically do not participate in politics. By communicating a descriptive social norm of low participation among members of their group, the information might have discouraged racial/ethnic minorities from participating (Gerber and Rogers 2009). Indeed, research in psychology indicates that information about what people actually do tends to encourage behavior that is consistent with that norm (Reno, Cialdini, and Kallgren 1993, Cialdini et al. 2006). If this is the case, then information about (under)representation might be more effective at increasing participation if it avoids conveying a descriptive norm of low participation among particular racial/ethnic groups. We explore this possibility in future research.



References

- Abrajano, Marisa A. 2010. *Campaigning to the New American Electorate: Advertising to Latino Voters*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Barreto, Matt A. 2007. "¡Sí Se Puede! Latino Candidates and the Mobilization of Latino Voters." *The American Political Science Review* 101 (3): 425-441.
- Barreto, Matt A., Stephen A. Nuño, and Gabriel Sanchez. 2009. "The Disproportionate Impact of Voter ID Requirements on the Electorate-Evidence from Indiana." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 42(1): 111-116.
- Bobo, Lawrence, and Franklin D. Gilliam. 1990. "Race, Sociopolitical Participation, and Black Empowerment." *American Political Science Review* 84 (2): 377-393.
- Boudreau, Cheryl, Christopher S. Elmendorf, and Scott A. MacKenzie. 2019. "Racial or Spatial Voting? The Effects of Candidate Ethnicity and Ethnic Group Endorsements in Local Elections." *American Journal of Political Science* 63(1): 5-20.
- Butler, Daniel M. and David E. Broockman. 2011. "Do Politicians Racially Discriminate Against Constituents? A Field Experiment on State Legislators." *American Journal of Political Science* 55(3): 463-477.
- Chen, Serena, and Shelly Chaiken. 1999. "The Heuristic- Systematic Model in Its Broader Context." In *Dual-Process Theories in Social Psychology*, edited by Shelly Chaiken and Yaacov Trope, 73-96. New York: Guilford.
- Cialdini, Robert R., Linda J. Demaine, Brad J. Sagarin, Daniel W. Barrett, Kelton Rhoads, and Patricia L. Winters. 2006. "Activating and Aligning Social Norms for Persuasive Impact." *Social Influence* 1(1): 3-15.
- DeFrancesco Soto, Victoria M., and Jennifer L. Merolla. 2006. "Vota por tu Futuro: Partisan Mobilization of Latino Voters in the 2000 Presidential Election." *Political Behavior* 28: 285-304.
- DeSipio, Louis. 1996. *Counting on the Latino vote: Latinos as a new electorate*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Druckman, James N. and Thomas J. Leeper. 2012. "Learning More from Political Communication Experiments: Pretreatment and Its Effects." *American Journal of Political Science* 56(4): 875-896.
- Fraga, Bernard. 2016. "Candidates or Districts? Reevaluating the Role of Race in Voter Turnout" *American Journal of Political Science* 60(1): 97-122.



- Fraga, Bernard L. 2018. *The Turnout Gap: Race, Ethnicity, and Inequality in a Diversifying America*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- García Bedolla, L., and Melissa R. Michelson. 2012. *Mobilizing Inclusion: Transforming the Electorate through Get-Out-the-Vote Campaigns*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Gay, Claudine. 2001. "The Effect of Black Congressional Representation on Political Participation." *American Political Science Review* 95 (3): 589-602.
- Gerber, Alan S. and Todd Rogers. 2009. "Descriptive Norms and Motivation to Vote: Everybody's Voting and so Should You." *Journal of Politics* 71(1): 178-191.
- Green, Donald P. 2004. "Mobilizing African American Voters using Direct Mail and Commercial Phone Banks: A Field Experiment." *Political Research Quarterly* 57(2): 245-255.
- Green, Donald P., and Alan S. Gerber. 2015. *Get Out the Vote: How to Increase Voter Turnout, 3rd ed.* Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.
- Green, Donald P., and Lynn Vavreck. 2008. "Analysis of Cluster-Randomized Experiments: A Comparison of Alternative Estimation Approaches." *Political Analysis* 16: 138-152.
- Griffin, John D., and Michael Keane. 2006. "Descriptive Representation and the Composition of African American Turnout." *American Journal of Political Science* 50 (4): 998-1012.
- Grimmer, Justin, Eitan Hersh, Marc Meredith, Jonathan Mummolo, and Clayton Nall. 2018. "Obstacles to Estimating Voter ID Laws' Effect on Turnout." *Journal of Politics* 80(3): 1045-1051.
- Hajnal, Zoltan L., Nazita Lajevardi, and Lindsay Nielson. 2017. "Voter Identification Laws and the Suppression of Minority Votes." *Journal of Politics* 79(2): 363-379.
- Hajnal, Zoltan L. and Taeku Lee. 2011. *Why Americans Don't Join the Party: Race, Immigration, and the Failure (of the Political Parties) to Engage the Electorate*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Hero, Rodney E., and Anne G. Campbell. 1996. "Understanding Latino Political Participation: Exploring the Evidence from the Latino National Political Survey." *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* 18 (2): 129-141.
- Johnson, B. T., and A. H. Eagly. 1989. "The Effects of Involvement on Persuasion: A Meta-analysis." *Psychological Bulletin* 106:290-314.



- Lee, Taeku, S. Karthick Ramakrishnan, and Ricardo Ramírez, Eds. 2006. *Transforming Politics, Transforming America: The Political Incorporation of Immigrants in the United States*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Leighley, Jan E. and Jonathan Nagler. 2013. *Who Votes Now? Demographics, Issues, Inequality, and Turnout in the United States*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Mansbridge, Jane. 1999. "Should Blacks Represent Blacks and Women Represent Women? A Contingent 'Yes.'" *The Journal of Politics* 61 3:628-657.
- Matsuoka, Natalie and Jane Junn. 2013. *The Politics of Belonging: Race, Public Opinion, and Immigration*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Merolla, Jennifer L., Adrian D. Pantoja, Ivy A.M. Cargile, and Juana Mora. 2013. "From Coverage to Action: The Immigration Debate and Its Effects on Participation." *Political Research Quarterly* 66 (2): 322-335.
- Panagopoulos, Costas and Donald P. Green. 2008. "Field experiments testing the impact of radio advertisements on electoral competition." *American Journal of Political Science* 52(1):156-68.
- Petty, Richard E., and John T. Cacioppo. 1996. *Attitudes and Persuasion: Classic and Contemporary Approaches*. Boulder, CO: Westview.
- Petty, Richard E., John T. Cacioppo, and R. Goldman. 1981. "Personal Involvement as a Determinant of Argument-Based Persuasion." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 41:847-55.
- Ramirez, Ricardo. 2007. "Segmented Mobilization: Latino Non-partisan Get Out the Vote Efforts in the 2000 General Election." *American Politics Research* 35 (2): 155-175.
- Reno, Raymond R., Robert B. Cialdini, and Carl A. Kallgren. 1993. "The Transsituational Influence of Social Norms." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 64 (1): 104-12.
- Rocha, Rene R., Caroline J. Tolbert, Daniel C. Bowen and Christopher J. Clark. 2010. "Race and Turnout: Does Descriptive Representation in State Legislatures Increase Minority Voting?" *Political Research Quarterly* 63 (4): 890-907.
- Rosenstone, Steven J. and John Mark Hansen. 1993. *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.



- Sanchez, Gabriel R. and Vargas, Edward D. 2016. "Taking a Closer Look at Group Identity: The Link Between Theory and Measurement of Group Consciousness and Linked Fate." *Political Research Quarterly* 69(1): 160-174.
- Schuman, Howard, Charlotte Steeh, Lawrence Bobo, and Maria Krysan. 1998. *Racial Attitudes in America: Trends and Interpretations, Revised Edition*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Sobel, Richard, and Robert Ellis Smith. 2009. "Voter-ID Laws Discourage Participation, Particularly among Minorities, and Trigger a Constitutional Remedy in Lost Participation." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 42 (1): 107-110.
- Tate, Katherine. 2003. *Black Faces in the Mirror: African Americans and Their Representativeness in the U.S. Congress*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Valenzuela, Ali, and Melissa Michelson. 2016. "Turnout, Status, and Identity: Mobilizing Latinos to Vote with Group Appeals." *American Political Science Review* 110 (4): 615-630.
- Verba, Sidney, Kay L. Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady. 1995. *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Williams, Melissa S. 1998. *Voice, Trust, and Memory*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Wong, Janelle S. 2005. "Mobilizing Asian American Voters: A Field Experiment." *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 601 (1): 102-14.

Appendix

Table A1. Sample Covariate Means (SD)⁹

Covariate	Mean (SD)
Education	4.05 (1.5)
Income	6.43 (3.41)
Interest	3.43 (1.14)
Ideology	3.47 (1.6)
Age	40.85 (15.07)
Democrat	0.55 (0.5)
Female	0.58 (0.49)
Asian	0.36 (0.48)
Latino	0.29 (0.45)
Black	0.35 (0.48)

⁹ Covariates coded as follows: Education [1-7], Income [1-12], Political Interest [1-5], Ideology [1-7], Age [numeric], rest coded as proportion.

Table A2. Covariate Means across Treatment conditions, (SD)

Control	Group Identity	Underrepresentation	Standard GOTV	State Identity	Balance Test¹⁰
4.04 (1.47)	4.07 (1.52)	3.98 (1.48)	4.02 (1.53)	4.14 (1.49)	0.67 (p < 0.61)
6.31 (3.42)	6.48 (3.33)	6.4 (3.4)	6.28 (3.47)	6.71 (3.43)	0.67 (p < 0.61)
3.47 (1.16)	3.47 (1.14)	3.42 (1.15)	3.35 (1.13)	3.45 (1.11)	0.85 (p < 0.49)
3.57 (1.64)	3.4 (1.59)	3.39 (1.57)	3.53 (1.54)	3.45 (1.65)	0.99 (p < 0.41)
40.25 (40.25)	41.74 (41.74)	41.58 (41.58)	40 (40)	40.73 (40.73)	1.21 (p < 0.303)
0.55 (0.5)	0.55 (0.5)	0.56 (0.5)	0.56 (0.5)	0.5 (0.5)	3.96 (p < 0.41)
0.54 (0.5)	0.59 (0.49)	0.55 (0.5)	0.62 (0.49)	0.58 (0.49)	7.72 (p < 0.10)
0.38 (0.49)	0.38 (0.49)	0.34 (0.47)	0.36 (0.48)	0.37 (0.48)	2.64 (p < 0.61)
0.29 (0.45)	0.27 (0.44)	0.29 (0.46)	0.31 (0.46)	0.29 (0.45)	1.4 (p < 0.82)
0.33 (0.47)	0.35 (0.48)	0.37 (0.48)	0.34 (0.47)	0.35 (0.48)	1.68 (p < 0.79)

NOTE: The State Identity and Group Identity covariate means are from the two additional treatment groups included in the survey, but analyzed in a separate paper. In the State Identity treatment group, respondents received a message highlighting their identification with their state. In the Group Identity treatment, respondents received a message highlighting their identification with their race/ethnicity.

¹⁰ Balance Test column reports F-statistic and p-value for Education, Income, Interest, Ideology, and Age and the Chi-Square statistic and p-value for Democrat, Female, Asian, Latino, and Black.

Table A3. Descriptive Awareness Moderator on the Likelihood of Voting by Race/Ethnicity, OLS

	AAPI (Control)	AAPI (Standard GOTV)	Latino (Control)	Latino (Standard GOTV)	Black (Control)	Black (Standard GOTV)
State Identity	-0.333 (0.305)	-0.459 (0.331)	0.450 (0.309)	0.233 (0.334)	0.050 (0.280)	-0.049 (0.287)
Underrepresentation	-0.296 (0.341)	-0.422 (0.365)	0.185 (0.323)	-0.031 (0.347)	-0.191 (0.270)	-0.290 (0.277)
Racial/ethnic Identity	-0.574 * (0.322)	-0.700 ** (0.347)	-0.050 (0.309)	-0.267 (0.334)	0.313 (0.275)	0.214 (0.282)
Control		-0.126 (0.331)		-0.217 (0.334)		-0.099 (0.275)
Standard GOTV	0.126 (0.331)		0.217 (0.334)		0.099 (0.275)	
Aware of underrepresentation	-0.093 (0.242)	-0.118 (0.275)	0.373 (0.245)	0.091 (0.272)	0.046 (0.219)	-0.133 (0.226)
State Identity * Aware	0.422 (0.343)	0.447 (0.367)	-0.623 * (0.345)	-0.341 (0.365)	-0.173 (0.320)	0.006 (0.325)
Underrepresentation * Aware	0.477 (0.376)	0.502 (0.398)	-0.400 (0.356)	-0.118 (0.375)	0.181 (0.310)	0.360 (0.315)
Racial/ethnic Identity * Aware	0.650 * (0.357)	0.676 * (0.381)	0.022 (0.346)	0.304 (0.365)	-0.281 (0.316)	-0.102 (0.321)
Control * Aware		0.025 (0.366)		0.282 (0.366)		0.179 (0.315)
Standard GOTV * Aware	-0.025 (0.366)		-0.282 (0.366)		-0.179 (0.315)	
Intercept	3.074 *** (0.216)	3.200 *** (0.251)	3.050 *** (0.219)	3.267 *** (0.253)	3.258 *** (0.189)	3.357 *** (0.199)
N	623	623	521	521	621	621
R2	0.016	0.016	0.014	0.014	0.008	0.008
logLik	-950.693	-950.693	-722.730	-722.730	-908.804	-908.804
AIC	1923.385	1923.385	1467.459	1467.459	1839.608	1839.608

*** p < 0.01; ** p < 0.05; * p < 0.1.

Table A4. Descriptive Awareness Moderator on Contact Senator by Race/Ethnicity, Logit

	AAPI (Control)	AAPI (Standard GOTV)	Latino (Control)	Latino (Standard GOTV)	Black (Control)	Black (Standard GOTV)
State Identity	0.134 (0.518)	-0.821 (0.626)	-0.827 (0.668)	-0.693 (0.720)	0.288 (0.607)	0.486 (0.598)
Underrepresentation	-0.549 (0.531)	-1.504 ** (0.637)	-0.981 (0.677)	-0.847 (0.728)	0.362 (0.605)	0.560 (0.596)
Racial/ethnic Identity	0.311 (0.550)	-0.645 (0.652)	-0.163 (0.713)	-0.029 (0.762)	-0.034 (0.593)	0.164 (0.584)
Control		-0.956 (0.623)		0.134 (0.756)		0.198 (0.562)
Standard GOTV	0.956 (0.623)		-0.134 (0.756)		-0.198 (0.562)	
Aware of underrepresentation	-0.743 * (0.403)	-1.638 *** (0.535)	-1.522 *** (0.538)	-1.638 *** (0.596)	-1.410 *** (0.446)	-1.114 *** (0.432)
State Identity * Aware	0.268 (0.573)	1.163 * (0.673)	0.809 (0.724)	0.924 (0.769)	-0.090 (0.662)	-0.385 (0.652)
Underrepresentation * Aware	0.285 (0.591)	1.180 * (0.687)	0.971 (0.731)	1.086 (0.775)	-0.177 (0.658)	-0.473 (0.648)
Racial/ethnic Identity * Aware	-0.467 (0.603)	0.428 (0.698)	-0.045 (0.769)	0.070 (0.811)	0.429 (0.649)	0.134 (0.638)
Control * Aware		0.895 (0.669)		0.115 (0.803)		-0.295 (0.621)
Standard GOTV * Aware	-0.895 (0.669)		-0.115 (0.803)		0.295 (0.621)	
Intercept	0.325 (0.364)	1.281 ** (0.506)	1.386 *** (0.500)	1.253 ** (0.567)	1.179 *** (0.404)	0.981 ** (0.391)
N	804	804	639	639	766	766
logLik	-533.574	-533.574	-426.066	-426.066	-502.383	-502.383
AIC	1087.147	1087.147	872.132	872.132	1024.766	1024.766

*** p < 0.01; ** p < 0.05; * p < 0.1.

Table A5. Descriptive Awareness Moderator on Participation Index by Race/Ethnicity, OLS

	AAPI (Control)	AAPI (Standard GOTV)	Latino (Control)	Latino (Standard GOTV)	Black (Control)	Black (Standard GOTV)
State Identity	0.129 (0.809)	-0.231 (0.876)	-1.502 (0.930)	-0.182 (1.011)	0.590 (0.859)	1.077 (0.866)
Underrepresentation	-0.717 (0.838)	-1.077 (0.903)	-0.370 (0.955)	0.950 (1.034)	1.294 (0.846)	1.781 ** (0.853)
Racial/ethnic Identity	-0.931 (0.847)	-1.291 (0.911)	-1.684 * (0.930)	-0.364 (1.011)	-0.148 (0.882)	0.339 (0.888)
Control		-0.360 (0.876)		1.320 (0.984)		0.487 (0.853)
Standard GOTV	0.360 (0.876)		-1.320 (0.984)		-0.487 (0.853)	
Aware of underrepresentation	-2.097 *** (0.632)	-2.213 *** (0.718)	-1.903 *** (0.709)	-1.678 ** (0.804)	-1.366 ** (0.682)	-1.746 ** (0.686)
State Identity * Aware	0.418 (0.896)	0.533 (0.959)	0.854 (1.030)	0.629 (1.097)	-1.374 (0.973)	-0.993 (0.976)
Underrepresentation * Aware	1.014 (0.926)	1.129 (0.987)	-0.684 (1.050)	-0.909 (1.116)	-1.474 (0.958)	-1.094 (0.961)
Racial/ethnic Identity * Aware	1.499 (0.929)	1.614 (0.990)	1.540 (1.034)	1.315 (1.101)	-0.091 (0.993)	0.289 (0.995)
Control * Aware		0.115 (0.956)		-0.225 (1.072)		0.380 (0.968)
Standard GOTV * Aware	-0.115 (0.956)		0.225 (1.072)		-0.380 (0.968)	
Intercept	8.161 *** (0.572)	8.522 *** (0.664)	9.320 *** (0.636)	8.000 *** (0.750)	8.941 *** (0.598)	8.455 *** (0.607)
N	804	804	640	640	766	766
R2	0.040	0.040	0.056	0.056	0.068	0.068
logLik	-2066.963	-2066.963	-1643.898	-1643.898	-2039.091	-2039.091
AIC	4155.926	4155.926	3309.796	3309.796	4100.182	4100.182

*** p < 0.01; ** p < 0.05; * p < 0.1.

CALIFORNIA SAMPLE TREATMENT SCRIPTS

CONTROL

As you may know, Earth Day happens every April. We would now like you to read a message that organizations often send to citizens.

Here is a message that has been used by: California Recycles

Recycling is Important! We want to remind you to recycle. Recycling is an important thing we can do to protect the planet. This year, remember your responsibilities as a citizen and reduce, reuse, and recycle.

If you have any questions about recycling, please visit the California Department of Resources Recycling and Recovery website (<http://www.calrecycle.ca.gov>). You can also call them toll free at (800) RECYCLE (732-9253). They are available to answer any questions you have about recycling.

STANDARD GOTV MESSAGE

As you may know, there is a general election in California this November. We would now like you to read a message that organizations often send to citizens during elections.

Here is a message that has been used by: The Voter Project

Voting is a right!

Whichever candidate or party you prefer, we want to remind you to exercise your right to vote this November. The right to vote is an important tradition. This election, remember your rights as a citizen. If you have any questions about the voting process, please visit the Secretary of State's website (<http://www.sos.ca.gov>). You can also call them toll free at (800) 345-VOTE (8683). They are available to answer any questions you have about exercising your right to vote.

UNDERREPRESENTATION MESSAGE

As you may know, there is a general election in California this November. We would now like you to read a message that organizations often send to citizens during elections.

Here is a message that has been used by: **The [Asian American & Pacific Islander/Black/Latino] Voter Project**

Voting is a right!

Whichever candidate or party you prefer, we want to remind you to exercise your right to vote this November. The right to vote is an important tradition. This election, remember your rights as a citizen.

Representation starts with your vote:

Many citizens are concerned with the underrepresentation of [Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs)/Blacks/Latinos] in government. [While AAPIs make up 14 percent of the California population, they only hold 10.8 percent of the seats in Sacramento/ While Blacks make up 13.3 percent of the U.S. population, they only hold 9.3 percent of the seats in the U.S. Congress/While Latinos make up 39 percent of the California population, they only hold 22.5 percent of the seats in Sacramento]. It is important to have more [AAPI/Black/Latino] elected officials, since they are more likely to put issues on the agenda and help pass policies that affect the AAPI community.

If you have any questions about the voting process, please visit the Secretary of State's website (<http://www.sos.ca.gov>). You can also call them toll free at (800) 345-VOTE (8683). They are available to answer any questions you have about exercising your right to vote.

NATIONAL SAMPLE TREATMENT SCRIPTS

CONTROL

As you may know, Earth Day happens every April. We would now like you to read a message that organizations often send to citizens.

Here is a message that has been used by: `{e://Field/rspst}` **Recycles**

Recycling is Important!

We want to remind you to recycle. Recycling is an important thing we can do protect the planet. This year, remember your responsibilities as a citizen and reduce, reuse, and recycle.

If you have any questions about recycling, please review what the environmental protection agency is doing in your state at <https://www.epa.gov/home/epa-your-state>.

STANDARD GOTV MESSAGE

As you may know, there is a general election in `{e://Field/rspst}` this November. We would now like you to read a message that organizations often send to citizens during elections.

Here is a message that has been used by: **The Voter Project**

Voting is a right!

Whichever candidate or party you prefer, we want to remind you to exercise your right to vote this November. The right to vote is an important tradition. This election, remember your rights as a citizen.

If you have any questions about the voting process, please visit the Secretary of State's website for $\{e://Field/rspst\}$. They are available to answer any questions you have about exercising your right to vote.

UNDERREPRESENTATION MESSAGE

As you may know, there is a general election in $\{e://Field/rspst\}$ this November. We would now like you to read a message that organizations often send to citizens during elections.

Here is a message that has been used by: **The [Asian American & Pacific Islander/Black] Voter Project**

Voting is a right!

Whichever candidate or party you prefer, we want to remind you to exercise your right to vote this November. The right to vote is an important tradition. This election, remember your rights as a citizen.

Your voice starts with your vote:

Many citizens are concerned with the underrepresentation of [Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs)/Blacks] in government. [While AAPIs make up 7.2 percent of the US population, they only hold 2.8 percent of the seats in the U.S. Congress/ While Blacks make up 13.3 percent of the U.S. population, they only hold 9.3 percent of the seats in the U.S. Congress.]

It is important to have more [AAPI/Black] elected officials, since they are more likely to put issues on the agenda and help pass policies that affect the [AAPI/Black] community.

If you have any questions about the voting process, please visit the Secretary of State's website for $\{e://Field/rspst\}$. They are available to answer any questions you have about exercising your right to vote.



RESEARCH

THE PANDEMIC IN PRISON: IMPLICATIONS FOR CALIFORNIA POLITICS AND POLICYMAKING

Amy E. Lerman, University of California, Berkeley
Jessie Harney, University of California, Berkeley

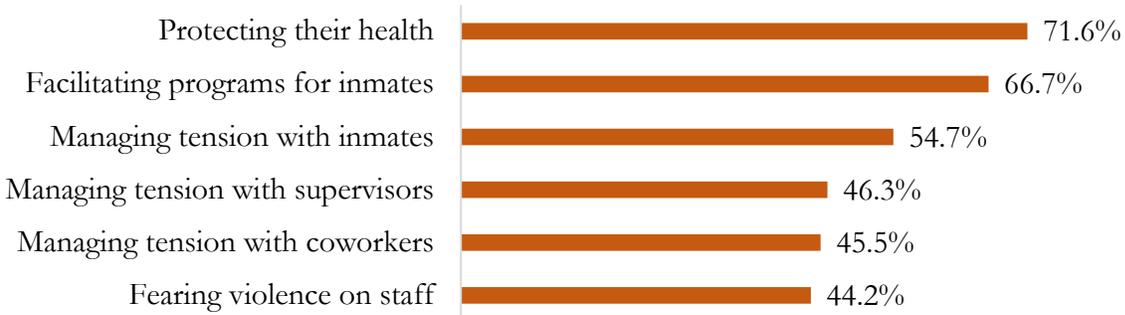
The effects of COVID-19 across California have been devastating, but the impact of the virus has been particularly acute in the state's overcrowded prisons and jails. The epidemic has clear implications for incarcerated individuals and their families, but also for the tens of thousands of Californians employed in the state's prison system. These workers represent a powerful force in state politics (Myers, 2018; Williams et al., 2020).

To develop an understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on California correctional officers, we deployed an online survey in May of 2020. The survey link was sent via email to all officers currently employed in the state's adult correctional institutions. We received 1,761 responses, constituting roughly 9% of California's correctional officer workforce. While the sample size is relatively small, respondents represent each of California's adult state correctional institutions and are broadly representative by race and gender.

Our results demonstrate that California's correctional officers have been negatively affected by COVID-19 in a variety of ways, which might powerfully shape state politics and policymaking in coming years. First, like many Americans, correctional officers are facing difficulties finding adequate childcare (50.1%), dealing with financial instability (58.6%) and protecting the health and safety of their loved ones (63.6%). They are also having difficulties finding space where they can be alone (42.7%) and managing their own stress at home (58.5%).

At the same time though, like other essential workers across the country, the coronavirus has created or exacerbated a host of work-related stressors for prison personnel. Figure 1 displays the distribution of officers reporting that workplace responsibilities have become more difficult to deal with in the context of COVID-19. Notably, more than two-thirds of officers reported that protecting their health at work (71.6%) and facilitating programs for incarcerated individuals (66.7%) were more difficult to manage as a result of the outbreak. About half (54.7%) suggested that managing tensions with incarcerated individuals had become more difficult in light of the pandemic.

Figure 1: COVID Work Stress: Percentage of CA State COs Finding Things More Difficult



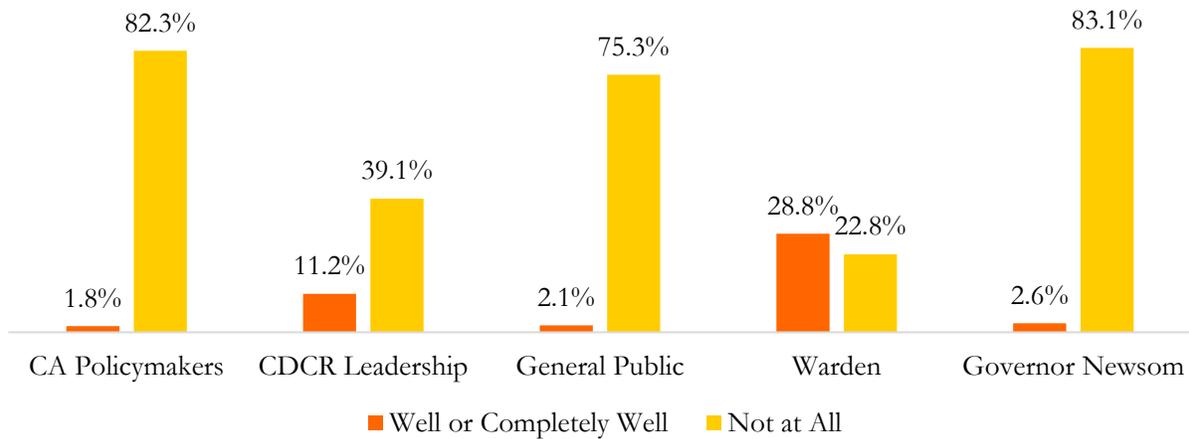
We also found high levels of frustration with aspects of the state’s COVID-19 response. While most officers (88.6%) reported having access to handwashing stations, about three-quarters (76.5%) reported that maintaining social distancing was difficult inside prison. Likewise, while a substantial majority (83.6%) of officers reported having access to the personal protective equipment they need at work, this was still far from universal. Moreover, though 80% noted receiving at least some of their PPE from their employer (the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, CDCR), 52.1% reported acquiring at least some of it themselves.

In addition, many officers reported having difficulty getting access to testing. Overall, less than a quarter (23.1%) indicated that they have either been tested or tried to get tested for COVID-19. Most strikingly, of the correctional staff that tried to get tested, more than two in five were unable to do so. Of those that had been tested, which constituted about 13.3% of the total sample, slightly more than one-in-ten (11.0%) have tested positive for COVID-19 and a non-trivial 15.2% were unsure if they had tested positive.

Politics and Policies

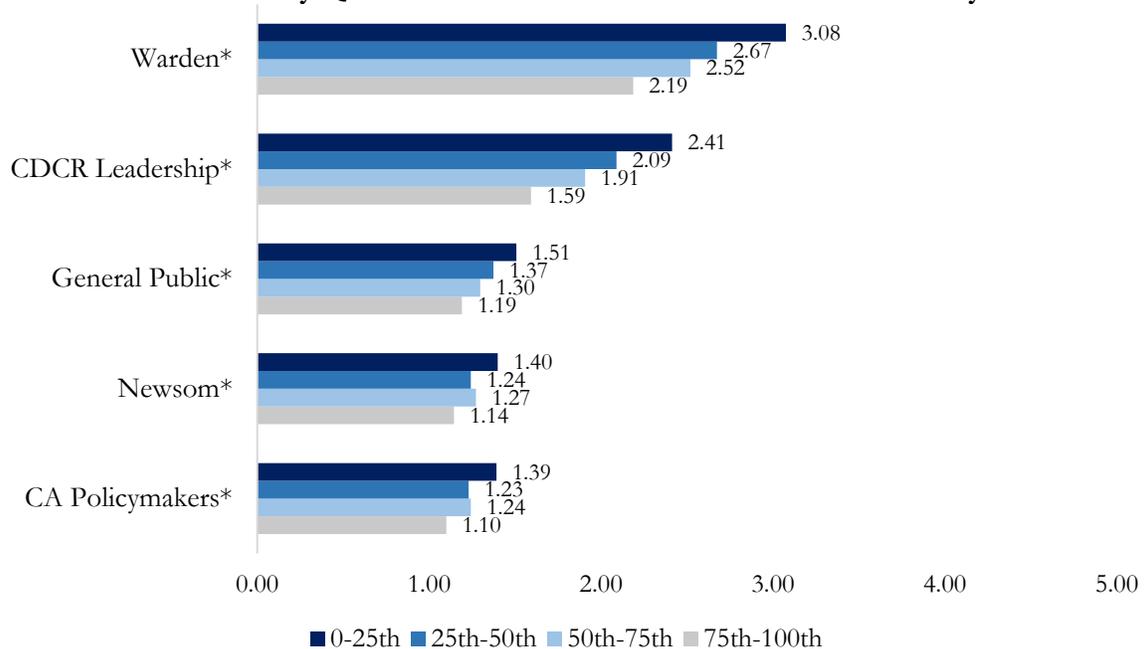
In addition to asking about correctional officers’ experiences with COVID, we also asked respondents whether they felt various groups and individuals in the state understood what they are experiencing related to the outbreak. A majority of correctional officers perceived the state’s primary stakeholders, including the Governor, policymakers, and the general public, as failing to understand what they are experiencing (see Figure 2). Levels of perceived understanding by CDCR leadership and the warden at an officer’s prison were somewhat higher, but a substantial proportion (39.1% and 22.8%, respectively) still felt their experiences were “not at all” understood by these actors.

Figure 2: Feeling Understood by Stakeholders



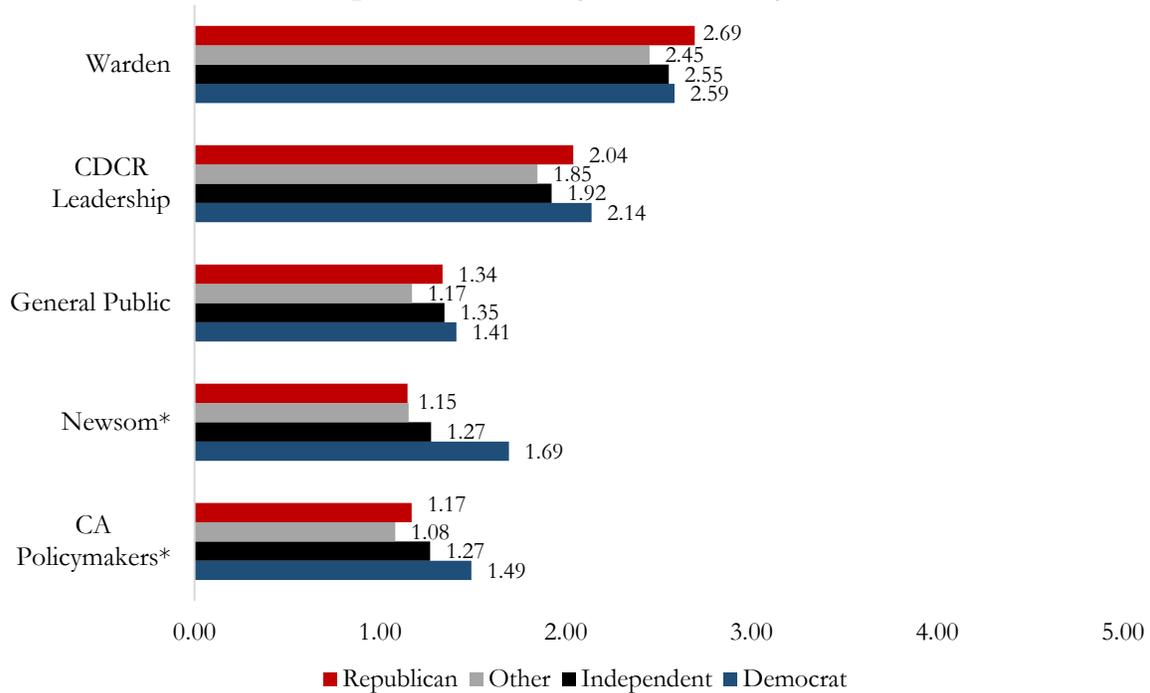
On these measures, we also find consistent differences when we compare officers by levels of reported occupational stress. Figure 3 shows the average score for feeling understood by each group, separately by each quartile of COVID-19-related work stress. For all groups, average feelings of being understood varied significantly by quartile stress. However, officers who reported greater difficulty coping during COVID-19 tended to feel less understood across the board.

Figure 3: Average Score for Feeling Understood by Each Group or Individual by Quartile of COVID-related Work Stress Intensity



Not surprisingly, officers' party identification also seemed to matter here. Of those self-identifying their political partisanship in our sample, 15.8% identified as Democrats, 51.6% as Republicans, and 32.6% were either Independent or supported another party. Along with COVID-related stress, partisanship appeared to matter a great deal to whether officers felt understood, particularly in the context of elected stakeholders. Specifically, self-identified Democrats indicated feeling more understood by Governor Newsom and other elected officials in the state. Notably, however, perceived levels of understanding by these stakeholders was low even among Democrats, and we find no significant difference in perceptions of other stakeholders (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Average Score for CA State COs Feeling Understood by Each Group or Individual by Political Party/Preference



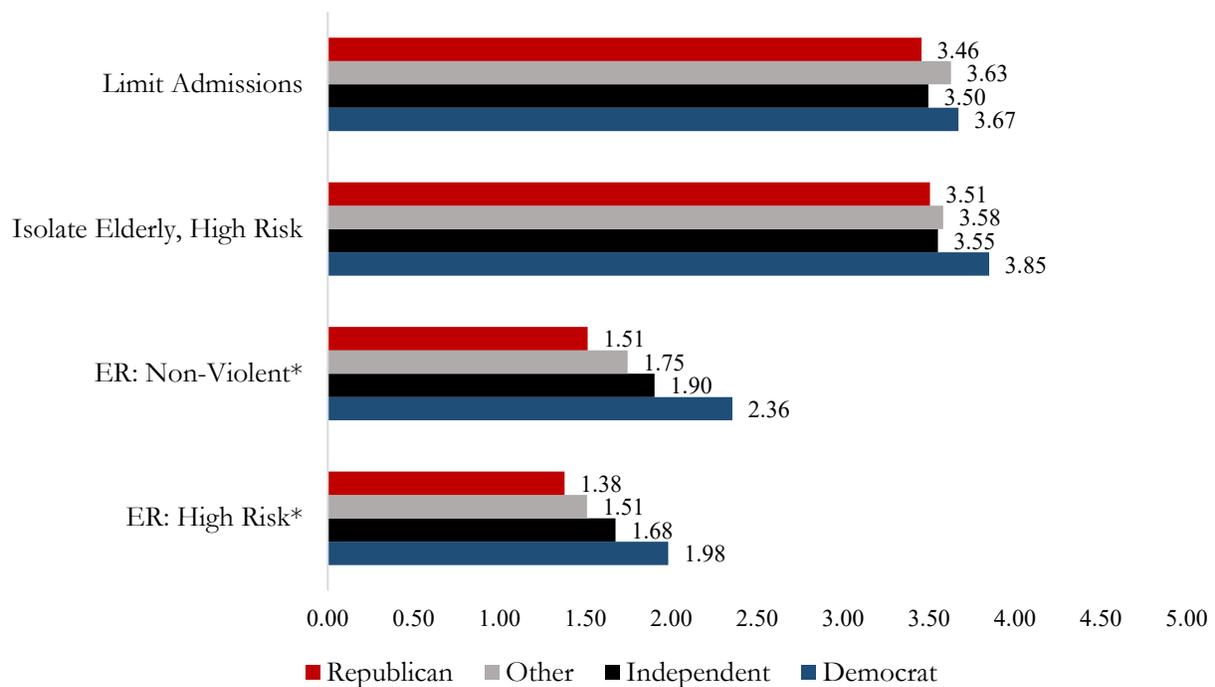
We similarly find significant differences across partisanship when it comes to support for policy initiatives aimed at reducing the spread of COVID in prison. Specifically, we asked officers about four policy initiatives the state has considered (and in some cases has already implemented) in response to the outbreak. Two of these policies focus on efforts to stop incoming cases (limiting new admissions to state prison, and isolating the elderly or those at high-risk for severe COVID-19 symptoms), and two focused on lowering the risk of contagion within state facilities (via early release for elderly or high-risk individuals, and early release for those with non-violent offenses). Overall, support for all four proposals was generally low, but support was substantially lower for the early release options (see Table 1).

Table 1: Officer Support for COVID-19 Policy Initiatives

	Early Release (Elderly/High Risk)	Early Release (Non-Violent)	Limiting Admissions	Isolation of Elderly/High Risk
Frequency	82	132	636	634
Percentage	7.2%	11.6%	55.8%	55.5%
<i>N</i>	1,141	1,140	1,140	1,143

Again, this difference is shaped by partisanship. Figure 5 reports the average support for each policy initiative by political party. As the figure shows, Democrats indicated significantly greater support for both early release options (high risk or elderly, and those with non-violent offenses) relative to Republicans. Partisan differences were not significant on attitudes towards the other policies.

Figure 5: Average Support for COVID-19 Prison Policies by Political Party/Preference

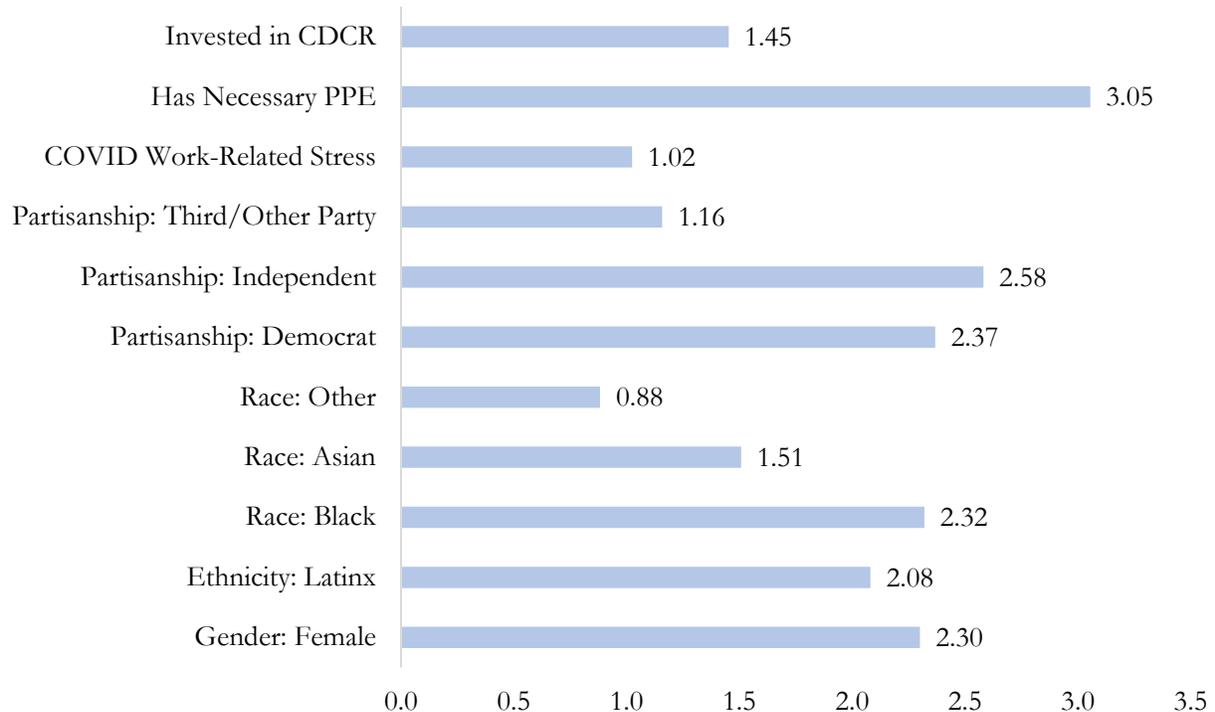


In order to understand further what factors contribute to officers' attitudes towards early release, we use a statistical model to estimate the odds that officers with different characteristics express support for these policies. The outcome of interest is measured as whether officers said they supported or strongly supported at least one of the following policies: early release of some individuals at high risk from contracting COVID-19, and/or early release of some incarcerated individuals who had committed a non-violent offense. We account for a variety of factors, including officer demographics and employment characteristics (i.e., race, ethnicity, gender, political preference, and security level), their experience of COVID-19 (including whether they had experienced symptoms of the virus, and whether they reported additional COVID-related stress at home or work measured by two separate indices), and whether they had access to PPE. We also include an indicator of workplace attachment, measured by officers' self-reported willingness to give more of their own effort to help CDCR as an organization succeed.

Our results suggest clear differences by demographics: those who identified as female, as well as Black and Latinx officers, had twice the odds of indicating support for at least one of these early release policies. Unsurprisingly, political party mattered here as well; both Democrats and Independents had twice the odds of supporting some form of early release, compared to Republicans. But experiences with COVID-19 mattered too, even when we account for these other factors. Specifically, officers who reported having access to PPE had three times greater odds of supporting early release in some form, compared to officers that did not have access to PPE. Additionally, feeling more work-related stress as a result of COVID-19 was associated with increased support of early release of incarcerated individuals. Finally, the more strongly officers agreed that they were willing to put in effort to help CDCR succeed, the more likely they were to support early release in some form. This suggests that officers who are more invested in their work may also be more likely to support policies that protect both themselves and the individuals under their care.¹

¹ These findings were broadly consistent in models predicting support for each early release policy considered separately.

Figure 6: Odds Ratios in Support for Early Release



Note: Results are from binary logistic regression. Also included but not shown: security level, has experienced COVID symptoms, and has experienced additional COVID-related stress at home. These variables were not statistically significant in the full model specification.

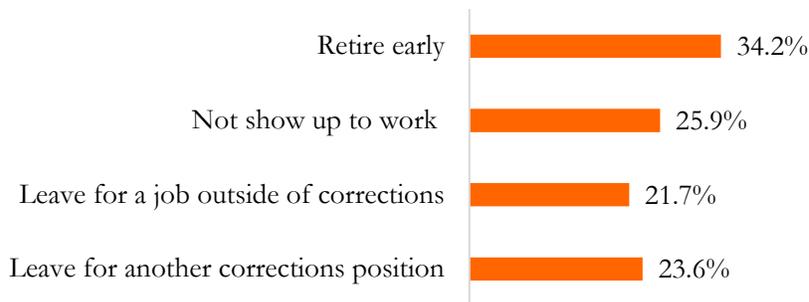
Implications and Discussion

In summary, we find that many California correctional officers are facing substantial work-related stress as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak. Notably, our survey closed in July of 2020. The prevalence of cases inside California’s prisons has increased substantially since that time, potentially exacerbating the work-related difficulties and attendant frustrations correctional officers are experiencing. In the coming months and years, the effects of the pandemic on these workers—as well as the state’s response to the virus—may become even more pronounced.

First, added workplace stressors caused by the virus may well increase officer absenteeism and turnover in both the short and longer term. In our survey, roughly one-quarter of officers reported that the COVID outbreak has made it more likely they will not show up at work. More than one in three officers also indicated that they are more likely to retire early as a result of the outbreak, with over 20% more likely to leave for a job outside of corrections (see Figure 7). To the extent that officers act on their intention, this would exacerbate a long-standing problem of staffing within state corrections,

potentially causing even further strain on remaining workers. This is especially true if the situation in state prisons remains dire or worsens in the coming months.

Figure 7: Percentage Indicating the Virus Has Made Them More Likely To Do the Following:



At the same time, it is clear that a majority of officers are opposed to the sorts of reforms that the state has already begun to implement in order to reduce virus transmission. While CDCR has been widely criticized for inaction and missteps in managing the outbreak—for instance, the Prison Policy Initiative gives California an F+ grade for its efforts to prevent deaths behind bars (Widra & Hayre, 2020)—the state recently announced that an additional 8,000 incarcerated individuals could be eligible for release, on top of the 10,000 that had already been let out of prison (CDCR, 2020a). Given that relatively few officers support policies allowing for early release, there may be political repercussions for officials if these and future population reductions continue to be carried out without further efforts to convince officers that these actions are necessary and appropriate.

Finally, our finding that the large majority of officers do not feel at all understood by Governor Newsom and other state leaders might well have political implications. This is especially true given that a perceived lack of understanding was prevalent even among many of the self-identified Democrats in our sample. It is therefore plausible that, come election time, elected officials will struggle to retain the support of state correctional workers and their families—as well as the powerful union that represents them.

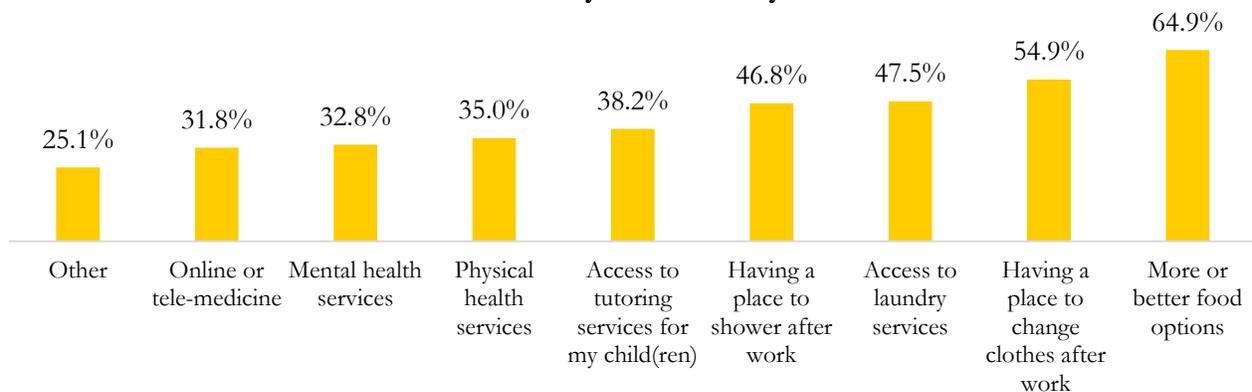
This is not inconsequential. The union representing correctional officers in California has historically been one of the largest donors to local and state-wide political campaigns, giving to both Democratic and Republican political candidates, and has established a formidable lobbying presence in Sacramento (Page, 2013). While the organization’s “electoral largess” shrank in some election cycles of the last decade (Soriano, 2014), the union appears poised to reassert its position. Responding to rising infections and recent COVID-related deaths among prison staff, as well as threats of furloughs, a pay cut and prison closures, union President Glen Stailey announced that: “Today, we recognize that it is time for us to return to the days of old, when we had a much larger footprint in California politics and were referred to as the ‘800-pound gorilla’” (Venteicher, 2020b).

Our survey results do offer some specific recommendations for how state policymakers and correctional leaders can begin to address officers’ concerns. Some of the issues we identify have already been attended to in recent weeks. For instance, issues with both the availability of PPE (CDCR, 2020b) and access to testing for correctional staff (Venteicher, 2020a) have featured prominently in recent efforts. These steps are laudable and must continue.

But other policies and practices still remain to be addressed. Perhaps most concerning, we find that a sizable proportion of officers (39.8%) reported feeling that they would need to go to work even if they were experiencing symptoms of an illness, given existing policies related to pay and sick leave. Policy changes might help to alleviate this tension: we find that the proportion falls somewhat when we ask whether officers would still go to work sick if they had additional sick leave available to them (30.7%), and falls substantially under the hypothetical condition of providing officers with paid administrative leave due to sickness (14.8%).

Addressing even the more basic needs faced by officers during the pandemic could prove exceedingly valuable, too. We asked officers about a range of programs and services that might be useful to them during this time. About a third of officers responded that additional mental and physical health services would be very or extremely useful to them right now. But even larger proportions voiced a desire for assistance reducing the risk of COVID spread to themselves and their families, such as by providing a place for them to shower and change clothes after work, or giving them access to laundry services at work to avoid taking contaminated clothes home. These sorts of additional supports could have substantial benefits to public health, but might also help state policymakers signal a concern for officers’ well-being, in ways that could begin rebuilding trust and understanding between officers and the state’s political and policy actors.

Figure 8: Percentage Reporting Additional Service or Program Type Would be Very or Extremely Useful





References

California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (2020a). CDCR announces additional actions to reduce population and maximize space systemwide to address COVID-19. Retrieved from: <https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/news/2020/07/10/cdcr-announces-additional-actions-to-reduce-population-and-maximize-space-systemwide-to-address-covid-19/>

California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (2020b). Staff Use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). Retrieved from: [https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/covid19/wp-content/uploads/sites/197/2020/04/R_STAFF-USE-PPE.pdf?label=Staff%20Use%20of%20Personal%20Protective%20Equipment%20\(PPE\)&from=https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/covid19/memos-guidelines-messaging/](https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/covid19/wp-content/uploads/sites/197/2020/04/R_STAFF-USE-PPE.pdf?label=Staff%20Use%20of%20Personal%20Protective%20Equipment%20(PPE)&from=https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/covid19/memos-guidelines-messaging/)

Myers, J. (2018). Column: Once an electoral juggernaut, California's prison-guard union steps back into the spotlight. *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved from: <https://www.latimes.com/politics/la-pol-ca-road-map-prison-guards-union-20180923-story.html>

New York Times (2020). Coronavirus in the U.S.: Latest map and case count. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/us/coronavirus-us-cases.html>

Page, J. (2013). *The Toughest Beat: Politics, Punishment, and the Prison Officers Union in California*. Oxford University Press.

Pauly, M. (2020) Coronavirus cases skyrocket at bay area prison after inmate transfers. *Mother Jones*. Retrieved from: <https://www.motherjones.com/crime-justice/2020/06/san-quentin-coronavirus-cases-skyrocket-at-bay-area-prison-after-inmate-transfers/>

Soriano, S. (2014). CCPOA's clout high, but profile low. *Capitol Weekly*. Retrieved from: <https://capitolweekly.net/ccpoa-transition-powerful-low-profile-campaign-spending/>

Venteicher, W. (2020a) California Correctional Officers, Staff at All Prisons to be Tested for COVID-19. *Sacramento Bee*. Retrieved from: <https://www.sacbee.com/news/politics-government/the-state-worker/article243427161.html>

Venteicher, W. (2020b) California prison union wants to be '800 pound gorilla' in politics. Can it win over voters? *Sacramento Bee*. Retrieved from: <https://www.sacbee.com/news/politics-government/the-state-worker/article246020620.html>

Widra, E. and Hayre, D. (2020). Failing Grades: States' Responses to COVID-19 in Jails & Prisons. *Prison Policy Initiative*. Retrieved from: https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/failing_grades.html

Williams, B., Cyrus, A., Cloud, D., Augustine, D. Rorvig, L., & Sears, D. (2020). Correctional facilities in the shadow of COVID-19: Unique challenges and proposed solutions. *Health Affairs*. Retrieved from: <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/hblog20200324.784502/full/>

Appendix

Demographic Comparison:

COVID-19 Survey to California Correctional Officer Survey (2017)

Variable	Level	Frequency	Percentage	CCOS 2017 Comparison
Race	Asian	55	5.03%	3.31%
	Black	57	5.22%	6.97%
	Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander	28	2.56%	1.70%
	Other Race	95	8.69%	5.84%
	White	521	47.67%	33.53%
Ethnicity	Latinx	422	38.61%	25.53%
Gender	Female	179	16.03%	17.60%
	Male	875	78.33%	82.40%
	Other or Decline to Say	63	5.64%	--
Security Level	I	58	5.24%	5.57%
	II	302	27.31%	25.28%
	III	328	29.66%	28.74%
	IV	418	37.79%	40.41%

Logistic Regression of Support for Either or Both Early Release Policies (Elderly/High-Risk and/or Individuals with Non-Violent Offenses), Includes Clustered Standard Errors on Prison

Variable	Demographics		Demographics & COVID Factors		Demographics & Attitudinal Factors		All Factors	
	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE
Female	2.15**	0.53	2.36***	0.60	2.09**	0.51	2.30**	0.59
Black	2.32*	0.79	2.27*	0.81	2.34**	0.72	2.32**	0.71
Latinx	1.88**	0.45	1.98**	0.50	1.94**	0.47	2.08**	0.53
Asian	1.93	0.89	1.47	0.75	2.01	0.91	1.51	0.75
Other Race	0.71	0.25	0.81	0.28	0.74	0.27	0.88	0.32
Security Level II	1.04	0.54	0.96	0.50	1.03	0.54	0.95	0.49
Security Level III	0.74	0.35	0.68	0.34	0.69	0.32	0.62	0.30
Security Level IV	0.69	0.30	0.65	0.29	0.65	0.28	0.60	0.26
Democrat	2.29*	0.88	2.60*	1.01	2.12	0.82	2.37*	0.94
Independent	2.30**	0.61	2.50***	0.69	2.38***	0.63	2.58***	0.71
Other/Third Party	1.06	0.46	1.18	0.55	1.06	0.45	1.16	0.54
Had COVID Symptoms			1.19	0.31			1.19	0.31
COVID Stress Index: Home			0.99	0.01			0.99	0.01
COVID Stress Index: Work			1.02*	0.01			1.02*	0.01
PPE Access			2.96*	1.32			3.05*	1.34
Willing to Put in More Effort					1.355*	0.17	1.45**	0.19
<i>N</i>	739		732		738		731	



RESEARCH

EARLY IN THE PANDEMIC, THERE WAS NO PARTISAN DIVIDE OVER PREFERENCES FOR VOTING BY MAIL IN THE 2020 ELECTION

Thad Kousser, University of California, San Diego

Mindy Romero, Center for Inclusive Democracy at the University of Southern California

Mackenzie Lockhart, University of California, San Diego

Seth Hill, University of California, San Diego

Jennifer Merolla, University of California, Riverside

Abstract. In April, 2020, was there a partisan divide between eligible voters from California's major parties over whether they preferred to vote in person or through mail ballots in the November election, and what percentage of likely voters from each party said they would not vote if the election were held exclusively through the mail? Did partisans divide over policy proposals about how to conduct this election? We investigate these questions by analyzing a statewide survey of a diverse sample of 12,276 eligible voters conducted April 8-22, 2020. When we asked eligible voters how they wanted to cast their ballots this November, we found no significant divide between the Republican and Democratic eligible voters. More than half of eligible voters in both parties prefer to cast a ballot by mail, with nearly another two in ten voters preferring to drop off a ballot that has been sent to them in the mail. Gaps of eight to twelve percentage points emerge between partisans over support for policies that advance voting by mail, though there is still a strong consensus supporting these changes among all partisan affiliations.

Funding Acknowledgment: We are grateful to the University of California Office of the President's Multicampus Research Program for providing funding for this survey through the MRP-17-454899 grant.



I. Background and Research Approach

In national politics, a clear divide has emerged between leaders of America's two major parties about whether to shift toward mail ballot voting in order to hold a presidential election during the COVID-19 crisis. Democratic senators have introduced federal legislation to expand access to voting through the mail (Bowden 2020), while Republican leaders have spoken against this approach (Rutenberg, Haberman, and Corasaniti 2020). On April 8, 2020, President Trump tweeted that "Republicans should fight very hard when it comes to state-wide mail-in voting. Democrats are clamoring for it....for whatever reason, doesn't work out well for Republicans."

Are California's eligible voters as polarized as national political leaders when it comes to voting by mail during the current public health crisis? Research on prior elections in California and in other states that have shifted toward mail ballot voting on a county-by-county basis has shown little party divide on voting by mail, with these transitions having no impact on each party's turnout or vote share (Thompson et al. 2020). Surveys of eligible voters across the nation in 2020 show partisan polarization on voting by mail that emerged in April and grew by June (Lockhart et al. 2020). Has a divide opened in the state of California up this year in how voters aligned with the Democratic and Republican parties prefer to cast their ballots and in their views of election policies?

We address these questions through a major public opinion survey of California's eligible electorate conducted April 8-22, during the COVID-19 crisis but before the Governor's executive order shifted California's election toward voting by mail. We conducted our survey online, recruiting a sample of 12,276 respondents through the online platform Lucid Fulcrum Exchange. This platform connects researchers to panels of respondents who have already provided their demographic information, making it possible for us to draw diverse samples that reflect the key characteristics – race, ethnicity, age, gender, and education levels – of California's citizen voting age population. We sampled to meet targets of respondents matching these key demographic characteristics, and we created survey weights based on those targets.¹ All of our reported results are based on these weights. We provide a more comprehensive report on our full set of results, including breakdowns of how members of the state's largest racial and ethnic groups view the elections, in Kousser et al. (2020).

In this study, we focus on potential partisan divides. We measure partisanship 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. In our sample, 47.6% of respondents identified with or leaned toward the Democratic Party, while 29.7% identified with or leaned toward the Republican Party. Those who did not lean either way (22.8% of our sample) we label as independents.

¹ Our weights use gender on its own, the joint distribution of age by education (our categories for the ages of respondents are 18-24, 25-44, 45-64, and 65 and older, and for education they are high school or less, some college, Bachelors, or graduate degree) and the joint distribution of race by ethnicity (our categories for race are White, Black, Asian, and Other, and our categories for ethnicity are Hispanic or Not Hispanic).



II. Is There a Partisan Divide Over How Californians Want to Cast Their Own Ballots?

Figure 1 shows how Democratic, independent, and Republican eligible voters, as well as eligible voters overall, would prefer to cast their ballots in November's election. We asked whether they would like to vote in a traditional polling place (an option offered in the March primary in most counties), at a vote center (where voters in the 15 counties adopting the Voter's Choice Act in March could vote in person), by mailing in their ballot, or by dropping off a ballot that has been mailed to them at a vote center or secure drop box.

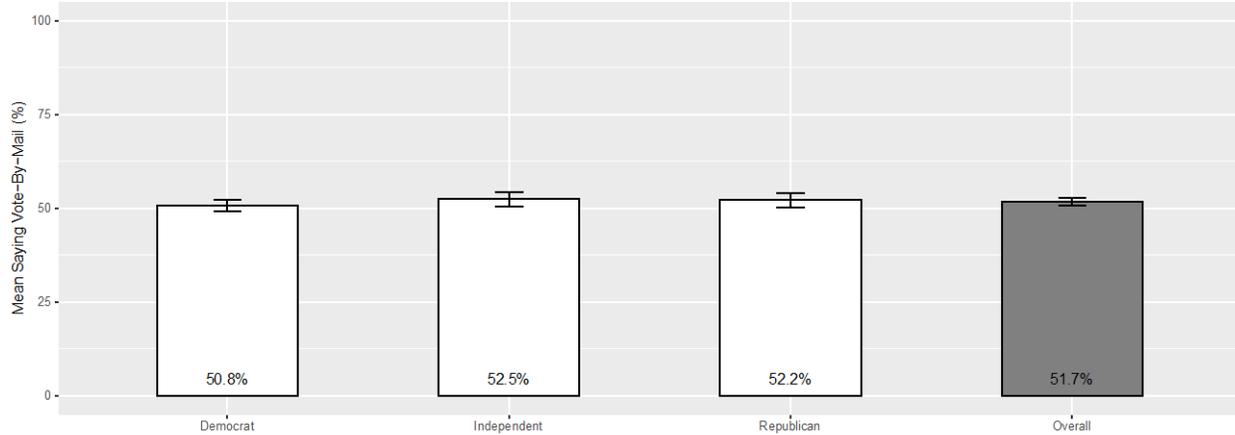
Overall, 51.7% of respondents said that they would prefer to vote by mailing in their ballot. Another 18.9% selected the option of dropping off a ballot that had been automatically mailed to them a month before election day. Combining these two numbers, a total of 70.6% of voters overall preferred to cast a ballot that has been mailed to them, far higher than the 57.8% of California voters who either mailed in or dropped off a mail ballot in the 2016 presidential election (California Secretary of State 2016). By contrast, only 29.4% selected one of the in-person options. Clearly, the COVID-19 crisis has led Californians, who have always voted by mail at a relatively high rate, to embrace this option even more strongly.

But have members of both parties made this shift together, or is there a large partisan divide in the embrace of voting by mail? Our party breakdowns demonstrate that no significant gap exists across partisan groups in California in preferences for mailing in a ballot versus in-person methods of voting. Voting by mail is the most preferred method of voting this November for each group and is favored by 50.8% of Democrats in our survey, 52.5% of independents, and by 52.2% of Republicans.

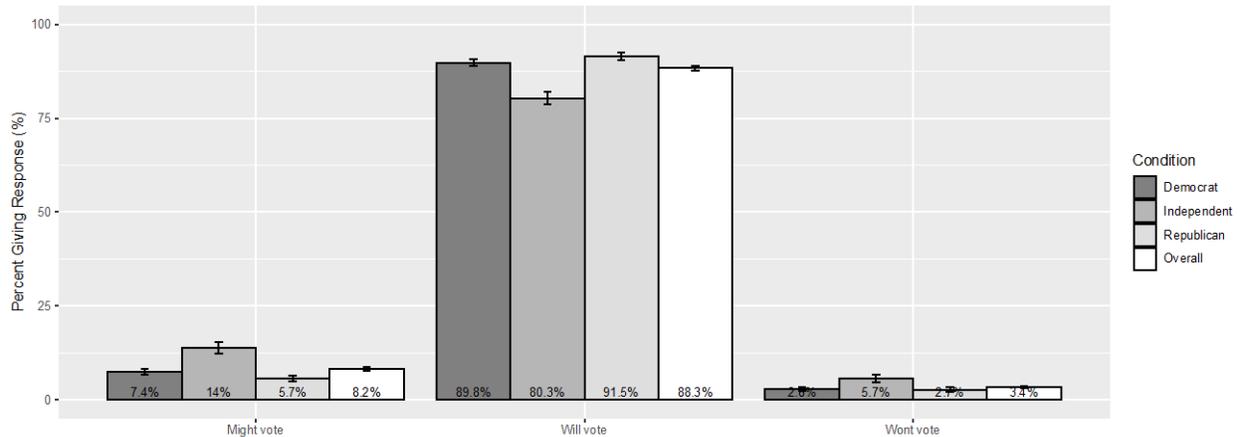
Would a policy that shifts away from in-person voting options toward voting by mail translate into differential turnout rates across partisan groups? To explore this question, we also asked respondents whether they were likely to participate in November if casting a mail ballot was their only option. To report responses to this question, we removed from our analysis those who had, earlier in the survey, indicated that they "definitely" or "probably" would not vote in November, in order to focus on the plans of potential voters. Overall, 3.4% of respondents planning to vote indicated that they "won't vote" if a mail ballot was their only option. Importantly, there was no gap between respondents in the major parties on these voting plans: 2.7% of Republicans and 2.8% of Democrats said that they likely would not participate in a mail ballot only election, while 5.7% of independents gave this response.

Figure 1. Personal Preferences on How to Cast a Ballot, by party

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?



In the upcoming November 3 election, if your only option to cast a ballot in your county was to vote by mailing in a ballot, how likely would you be to cast a ballot?



First, these findings suggest that moving to a vote-by-mail election in California this November is unlikely to favor either major party. Second, they highlight the fact that some eligible voters in both parties, and an even larger number of independents, could be discouraged from voting by this policy. Given California’s large voter population, with 25.3 million eligible voters and 20.7 million registered voters statewide (California Secretary of State 2020), these small percentages translate to hundreds of thousands of eligible voters who could be left out of the election. It will be important for state and local elections officials to conduct a major outreach effort designed to connect with those who prefer in-person voting options in order to keep them in California’s active electorate.



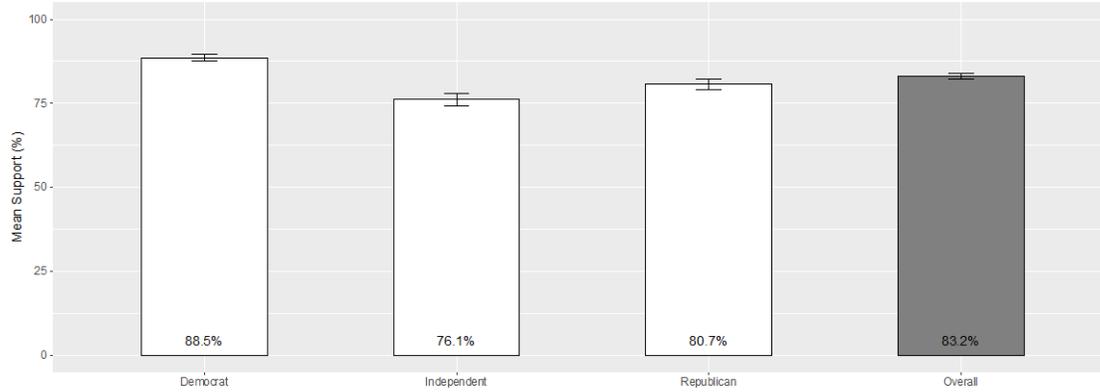
III. Is There a Partisan Divide Over the Election Policies that Californians Support?

In Figure 2, we report how our survey respondents viewed the major policy proposals that have been advanced at the national and state levels to increase opportunities to cast mail ballots in the November 2020 election. The first question asked whether they would support national legislation directing all states to send a mail ballot to any voter who requests one. While this “no- excuse absentee voting” policy has long been in place in California and other states, voters in sixteen states must provide a valid excuse to vote absentee. There is a strong consensus in favor of no-excuse absentee voting among Californians, with 83.2% overall supporting national legislation that would guarantee this opportunity to voters in every state. (For all of our policy questions, we calculate proportions based on “Yes” and “No” responses, removing “Unsure” responses.). Democrats in California are 7.8 percentage points more strongly supportive than Republicans of this option. More than eight in ten respondents in both major parties favor it.

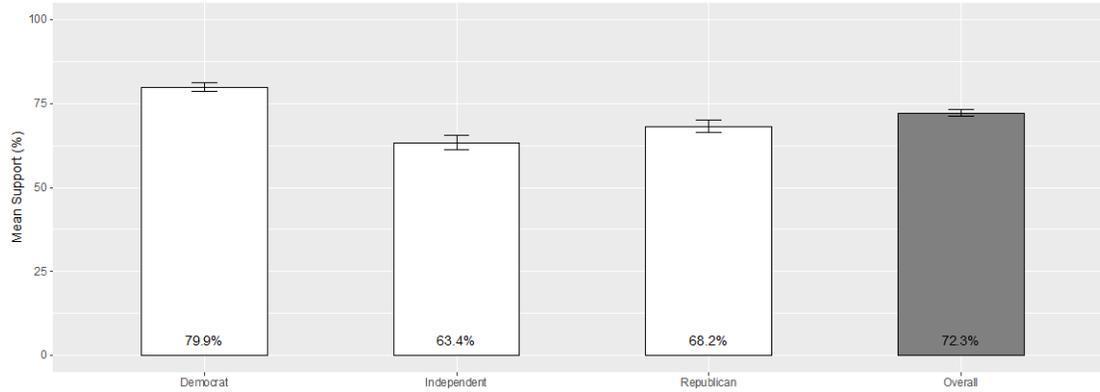


Figure 2. Policy Views on Voting by Mail, by party

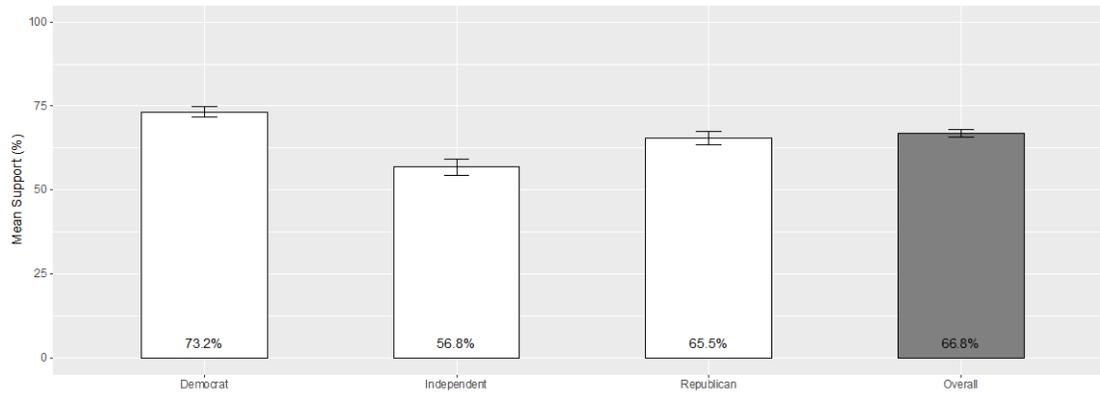
For the upcoming November 3 election, would you support national legislation directing all states to send a vote by mail ballot to any voter who requests one?



For the upcoming November 3 election, would you support national legislation directing all states to send a vote by mail ballot to every voter, even if they do not request one in advance



For the upcoming November 3 election, would you support national legislation directing all states to shift entirely to voting by mail, without having polling places or other in-person voting?



Overall, 72.3% of respondents taking a position favored a national law that would require states to send a mail ballot to every registered voter. This is one aspect of Gov. Newsom’s executive order, and California counties that have adopted the Voter’s Choice Act do this (with the exception of Los Angeles County, which had been exempted from the requirement to mail out ballots automatically until 2024 but which will mail them out this November under the executive order). On this policy, a



stronger partisan divide emerges: 79.9% of Democrats and 68.2% of Republicans support it (a gap of 11.7 percentage points).

Finally, we asked whether eligible voters supported national legislation that would move the November 2020 election entirely to voting by mail, without having polling places or other in-person voting. This represents a major policy shift toward voting by mail. In the context of this year's election, there was majority support for this proposal among eligible California voters overall (66.8%). It is important to note that the remaining 33.2% of eligible voters opposed such a policy, demonstrating that significant demand for in-person voting options remain. For Democrats, 73.2% supported the proposal, but so did 65.5% of Republicans (a gap of 7.7 percentage points).

Support for this proposal among independents was weakest at 56.8%, further indicating that connecting to voters who are not tied to either major party should be a strong priority for elections officials working to ensure that all eligible voters have the opportunity to participate as California implements a major transition in the way ballots are cast. True independents – those who lean toward neither party and are thus a subset of the voters who register as having “No Party Preference” – are still a sizeable bloc of voters in California and often less politically engaged than partisans. Ensuring that outreach efforts reach them and all eligible voters, regardless of party affiliations, should be a goal of elections officials and civic engagement groups alike during this election cycle.



References

Bowden, John, "Klobuchar, Wyden call for expanded mail-in and early voting amid coronavirus outbreak." *The Hill* March 16, 2020.

California Secretary of State, 2016. "Voter Participation Statistics by County." Accessed at <https://elections.cdn.sos.ca.gov/sov/2016-general/sov/03-voter-participation-stats-by-county.pdf>

California Secretary of State, 2020. "Report of Registration as of February 18, 2020." Accessed at <https://elections.cdn.sos.ca.gov/ror/15day-presprim-2020/county.pdf>.

Kousser, Thad, Seth J. Hill, Mackenzie Lockhart, Jennifer Merolla, and Mindy Romero. 2020. "How do Americans Want Elections to be Run During the COVID-19 Crisis?" *Research and Politics*. Forthcoming.

Lockhart, Mackenzie, Seth J. Hill, Jennifer Merolla, Mindy Romero, and Thad Kousser. 2020. "America's Electorate is Increasingly Polarized Along Partisan Lines About Voting by Mail During the COVID-19 Crisis." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.
<https://www.pnas.org/content/early/2020/09/21/2008023117>.

Rutenberg, Jim, Maggie Haberman and Nick Corasaniti, "Why Republicans Are So Afraid of Vote-by-Mail," *The New York Times* April 8, 2020.

Thompson, D., J. Wu, J. Yoder, A. B. Hall, "Universal Vote-by-Mail Has No Impact on Partisan Turnout or Vote Share." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 117 (25):14052-14056 (2020).



RESEARCH

WILL CONCURRENT ELECTIONS RESHAPE THE ELECTORATE?

Jonathan Collins, Brown University
Eddie Lucero, University of California, Merced
Jessica Trounstine, University of California, Merced

Funding Acknowledgment: We are grateful to the University of California Office of the President's Multicampus Research Program for providing funding for this survey through the MRP-17-454899 grant.

Research Question

In 2015, Governor Jerry Brown signed the California Voter Participation Rights Act (SB 415) into law. As its title suggests, the bill aimed to increase turnout in local elections by forcing all California jurisdictions to hold elections concurrently with statewide elections (in June or November of even years). Turnout in local elections is significantly lower than national turnout, averaging only 20% by some estimates (Alford and Lee 1968, Wood 2002, Hajnal and Lewis 2003, Caren 2007, Hajnal 2009). Scholars have found that election timing is the most important predictor of differences in aggregate turnout rates across cities (Alford and Lee 1968, Anzia 2014, Anzia 2011, Hajnal and Trounstine 2005). Hajnal and Lewis find that city elections that coincide with presidential elections are associated with a turnout of registered voters 36 percentage points higher than turnout in cities that do not hold elections that coincide with the presidential election (2001, 656). Caren finds that cities holding elections concurrent with the presidential election increase voter turnout by 27% compared to cities that do not (2007, 41). The logic behind SB 415 is that moving local elections to coincide with national elections will improve electoral participation.

State Senator Benjamin Hueso, who authored SB 415, also argues that "as a result of low voter turnout, the voting population often does not look like the general public as a whole and neither does the city council." On this point about inequality, existing research raises an important paradox. On the one hand, moving local elections to coincide with national elections could reduce the costs of voting (Downs 1957). In off-cycle elections, certain segments of the population, like municipal employees and homeowners, are more likely to vote, despite the additional barrier that off-cycle elections present (Fischel 2001; Moe 2011; Anzia 2011; Brookman and Skovron 2018). This means that without the implementation of a policy like SB 415, we should expect to see a skewed electorate at the local level; one that favors higher socio-economic status, White voters, homeowners, and organized interested groups (Anzia 2014, Hajnal 2010). Because voting costs are more acute among marginalized subsets of the population, such sub-populations may benefit most from reforms that reduce those costs. This could, in theory, mean that marginalized groups are better represented in concurrent elections.



An additional body of literature, however, reveals that although removing institutional barriers to participation increases voter turnout, it may not increase the representativeness of the electorate. Several scholars have found that election reforms that decrease the costs of voting exacerbate rather than diminish inequalities in the electorate. Berinsky (2005) argues that while cities and states may reduce the costs of voting (be it by offering election day registration or with concurrent elections), citizens may still be unwilling to participate because they lack the political efficacy to do so. We might register a voter at 18, mail them a ballot, and send them information on the issues and candidates, but a voter may still refuse to cast that ballot because they do not feel that their participation makes a difference or that politics affects them. Berinsky explains that the individual costs of participating in elections may vary from group to group or from person to person. Reducing the costs of voting may make it easier for some to vote, but it may still not be enough for others.

In this research note, we ask whether concurrent elections are likely to alter the composition of the electorate.

Summary of Findings

To better understand how SB 415 could affect California elections, we analyze *who* participates in concurrent versus nonconcurrent elections. The arguments in favor of on-cycle elections presume that there is a set of voters who would participate in local elections if only they were held at the same time as national elections. Is this assumption plausible? We draw on a large survey of low-propensity voters in California that asks about turnout in different kinds of elections.

The survey, fielded in August/September 2018, polled over 11,000 California citizens; nearly half of whom did not vote in the 2018 primary election. The data were gathered by Lucid through an on-line panel weighted to California demographic data from the 2017 Current Population Survey. We asked, "Do you always vote in local elections, do you sometimes miss one, do you rarely vote, or do you never vote?" We code *Local Voters* as those who responded that they "always vote." We find, similar to national elections, that respondents who say they always vote in local elections are more likely to be older, male, more educated, White or African American. Meanwhile, they are less likely to be Latino, Asian, have actual and perceived knowledge about local government, believe everyone should vote, believe they have influence over local government, or be strong partisans. However, for election timing to produce a different electorate in off-cycle versus on-cycle elections, it must be the case that patterns of turnout are different in local elections in comparison to national contests. To determine whether this is the case, we compared respondents' answers to our local vote question with their turnout response in national elections.



Table 1: Local and National Participation

	% of Local Non-Voters who...	% of Local Voters who...
Voted in 2018 Primary	29%	93%
Voted in 2016 General	57%	97%
Voted in 2016 Primary	44%	93%
Total N	6,617	4,417

Table 1 reveals nearly all local voters participate in national elections. But the inverse is not true. A substantial share (between about 30 and 60%) of non-voters at the local level participate in national elections, suggesting that local voters are a subset of the national electorate. However, a turnout differential between local and national elections does not mean that there is a necessarily difference in the demographic makeup of the two electorates.

To begin an investigation into the composition of different electorates, Figure 1 presents demographic characteristics of people who say that they always vote in local elections compared to those who say they voted in the 2016 Presidential election. Categories that reveal statistically significant differences are marked with an asterisk.



Figure 1: Demographic Composition of Local versus National Electorate

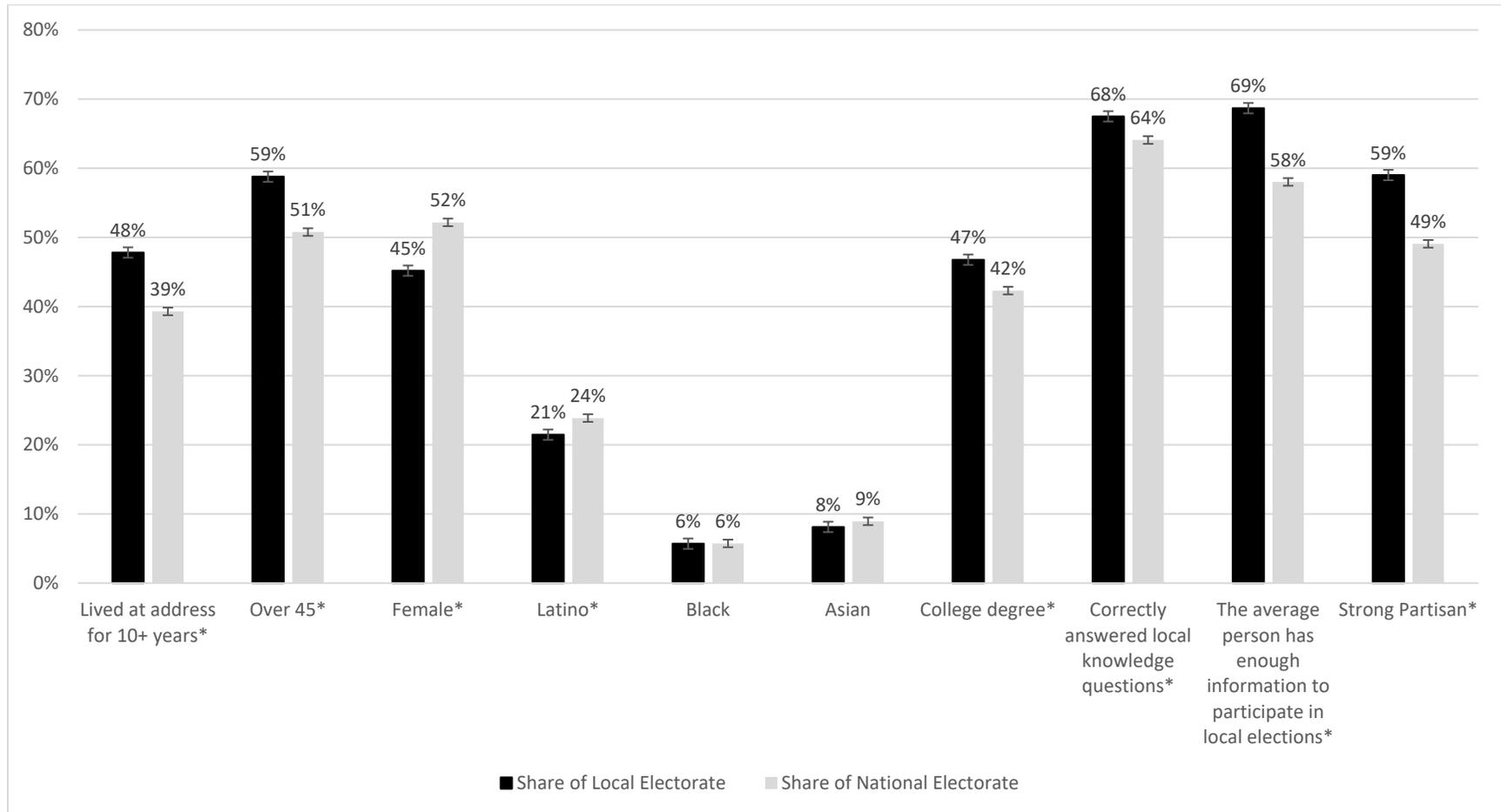




Figure 1 reveals that local electorates are comprised of voters who are: more likely to be permanent residents, over 45, male, strong partisans, highly educated, and efficacious, and less likely to be Latino. To better understand the differences between these electorates, we next turn to investigating the demographic and attitudinal correlates of the voters who participate nationally, but **not** locally.

To do this, we generated a measure of voters who *dropout* at the local level. The variable is coded one if voters participated in the 2016 general election but are not coded as local voters. We regress this measure on demographic variables including *race, age, gender, and education-level*. We also measured the length of *time registered at their current address*, and *strength of partisan affiliation*. We asked several questions to understand feelings of efficacy:

"Compared to you, how much do you think the people who vote in local elections know about which candidate ought to win?" Response scale (know-much-less to know-much-more) *Local Knowledge Candidate*.

"Now, thinking about local elections, where would you place yourself on the following scale?" Response scale ("Everyone should vote in every local election" or "The people who care the most should vote") *Care Most Vote*.

"How much influence do you think people like you can have over local government decisions?" Response Options (a lot, a moderate amount, a little, or none at all?) *Amount Influence Local Gov*.
"The average person has enough information about local government to participate in elections." Response options (agree or disagree) *Info to Participate*.

We asked two basic knowledge questions about local politics: "Are school board members elected or appointed?" and "Which level of government is most responsible for deciding where to place stop signs?" Respondents who answered both questions correctly were coded as *Local Questions Correct*.

Our regression analysis (shown in the Appendix) reveals that, compared to voters who vote in local elections, those who drop out at the local level are younger, more likely to identify as female, less educated, more likely to be Latino or Asian, less knowledgeable, less efficacious, more transient, and weaker partisans. We interpret these findings to conclude that election timing could substantially change the makeup of local electorates.

Finally, we sought to explore the reasons that people choose not to participate in local elections, even when they *do* participate in national elections. To probe individual explanations for lack of participation, we asked respondents, "Now, thinking about local elections (like for city council) - how much do you think each keeps **people like you** from voting in **local** elections." We offered 17 different explanations such as the location of polling places, or not feeling individual voters are able to make much of a difference.¹

¹ The 17 options were: The hours that polling locations are open. (1) Location, access, or transportation to polling locations. (2) That political events happen all the time but at the time of elections it's hard to remember all the events from previous years. (3) A feeling that individual voters aren't likely to make much difference. (4) Knowledge about when the election is. (5) Not knowing they are eligible to vote. (6) Not knowing others who usually participate in elections. (7) Feeling the candidates don't represent them, so what's the point. (8) The immediate costs of voting outweigh the longer-term benefits. (9) Even though people plan to vote and think it is



The survey asked the same question about reasons for not participating in national and statewide general elections. To understand the psychology of dropping out of local elections, we compare respondents' answers on the *Local* battery to the *National/Statewide* battery. That is, we are interested in understanding which barriers these particular voters highlight for local elections. By conducting paired t-tests among *dropouts*, we find four explanations that are given more weight for not voting in local (as compared to national) elections: knowledge about when the election is held (5), immediate cost of voting outweighs long-term benefits (9), not feeling qualified to choose candidates (11), and believing others will do a good job picking candidates (13). We interpret these results to suggest that a lack of procedural information *and* a lack of efficacy are the drivers of lower turnout at the local level.²

In conclusion, scholars of local politics have long understood the power of concurrent elections to bring voters to the polls. The authors of SB 415 drew on this body of work to generate a new state law forcing cities to hold elections at the same time as the national government. Observers predicted an increase in turnout for cities that change their election timing. But they also predicted that the demographic makeup of local electorates would change. Our analyses indicate that SB 415 is likely to have both effects. In this research note we have utilized a large-scale survey weighted to match California's diverse population to explore the composition of local versus national electorates. We find that local voters are a subset of national voters – those who vote in local elections nearly always participate in national elections, but the inverse is not true. We also find that this subset of local voters is whiter, older, more male, more educated, longer term residents, and stronger partisans than the national electorate.

important, challenges to voting on Election Day prevent them from doing so. (10) Not feeling qualified to choose which candidate to vote for. (11) Feeling the outcome of the election does not have a big effect on their life. (12) Believing that others who do vote will do a good job picking the right candidate for office. (13) Feeling that family and friends do not care if they vote or not. (14) The lines at the polling place will be long. (15) It isn't clear which party the candidates belong to. (16) Some local elections aren't held at the same time as state and national elections. (17)

² In a separate analysis we compared voters who dropout in local elections to those who vote in both national and local elections. In this comparison dropouts are more likely to highlight: that political events happen all the time but at the time of elections it's hard to remember all the events from previous years. (3); a feeling that individual voters aren't likely to make much difference. (4); knowledge about when the election is. (5); not knowing others who usually participate in elections. (7); feeling the candidates don't represent them, so what's the point. (8); not feeling qualified to choose which candidate to vote for. (11) feeling the outcome of the election does not have a big effect on their life. (12) So, in this comparison dropouts also appear to lack information and efficacy relative to avid voters.



Appendix

*Modeling Voter Dropout from the 2016 Presidential Election to
Local Elections*

	β	SE	$P \leq t $
Age	-0.004	0.000	0.000
Female	0.105	0.010	0.000
Education Level	-0.016	0.003	0.000
Latino	0.028	0.013	0.028
Black	0.010	0.022	0.631
Asian	0.059	0.018	0.001
Local Questions Correct	-0.027	0.011	0.012
Time Registered at Current Address	-0.007	0.001	0.000
Strength of Party Affiliation	-0.139	0.010	0.000
Care Most Vote	0.021	0.002	0.000
Amount Influence Local Gov	-0.111	0.006	0.000
Info to Participate	-0.167	0.010	0.000
Local Knowledge Candidate	0.036	0.005	0.000
Constant	0.977	0.034	0.000
R ²	0.230		
N	7,920		

Note: OLS regression



References

- Alford, R.R. and Lee, E.C. 1968. "Voting turnout in American cities." *American Political Science Review* 62:3 pp.796-813.
- Anzia, Sarah F. 2011. "Election Timing and the Electoral Influence of Interest Groups." *Journal of Politics* 73:2 pp. 412-427
- Anzia, Sarah F. 2014. *Timing and Turnout : How Off-Cycle Elections Favor Organized Groups*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Berinsky, Adam J. 2005. "The Perverse Consequences of Electoral Reform in the United States." *American Politics Research*. 33:4 pp. 471-491.
- Caren, Neal. 2007. "Big City, Big Turnout? Electoral Participation in American Cities." *Journal of Urban Affairs* 29:1 pp. 32-46.
- Downs, Anthony. 1957. *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. New York: Harper.
- Fischel, W. 2001. *The Homevoter Hypothesis*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hajnal, Zoltan L. 2010. *American's Uneven Democracy*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hajnal, Zoltan L., and Paul G. Lewis. 2003. "Municipal institutions and voter turnout in local elections." *Urban Affairs Review* 38:5 pp. 645-668.
- Hajnal, Zoltan, and Jessica Trounstine. 2005. "Where turnout matters: The consequences of uneven turnout in city politics." *The Journal of Politics* 67:2 pp. 515-535.
- Moe, Terry M. 2011. *Special Interest: Teachers Unions and America's Public Schools*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution
- Wood, Curtis. 2002. "Voter Turnout in City Elections." *Urban Affairs Review* 38:2 pp. 209-231.

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SACRAMENTO