

Vote-by-Mail and Voter Turnout in the Pandemic Election

April 14, 2021

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Voting during the pandemic presented unprecedented challenges

- Viral transmission for in-person voters and poll workers
- Difficulty staffing normal in-person options

Solutions involved less in-person voting

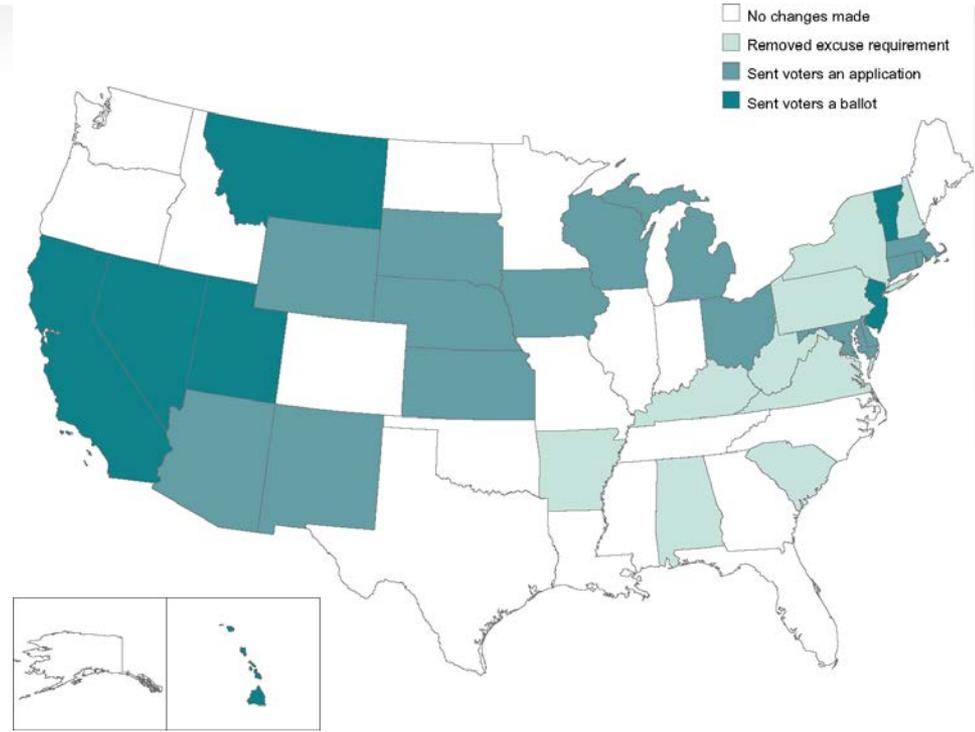
- Most states encouraged voting by mail
- California...
 - Mailed every voter a vote-by-mail ballot
 - Let counties adjust in-person options
 - Is considering permanent changes (AB 37)
- What were the effects on...
 - Total turnout?
 - Ballot rejection?

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- State and national approaches to the pandemic election
- State and national turnout in the pandemic election
- The effect of vote-by-mail policy
- Conclusions and policy recommendations

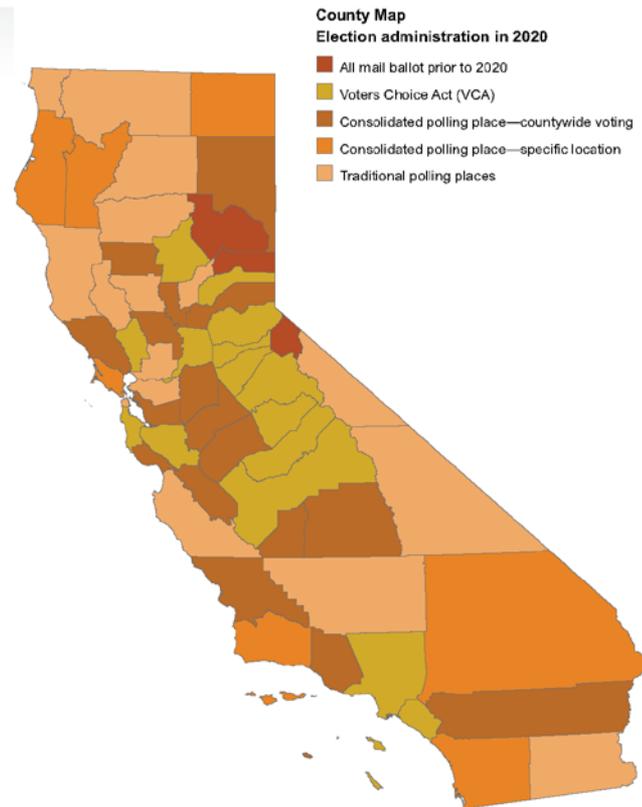
States relaxed access to mail ballots

- 9 states removed restrictions on signing up
- 15 states mailed every voter an *application*
- 7 states and DC mailed every voter a *ballot*
 - California was one of these states



California took a varied approach on policies

- Mailed ballots to all active voters in all counties
- In-person voting
 - Traditional polling place system (*16 counties*)
 - Consolidated polling places accessible to neighborhood (*7 counties*)
 - Consolidated polling places accessible to anyone in county (*17 counties*)
 - Voter's Choice Act (*15 counties*)
 - All vote-by-mail with no polling places (*3 counties*)



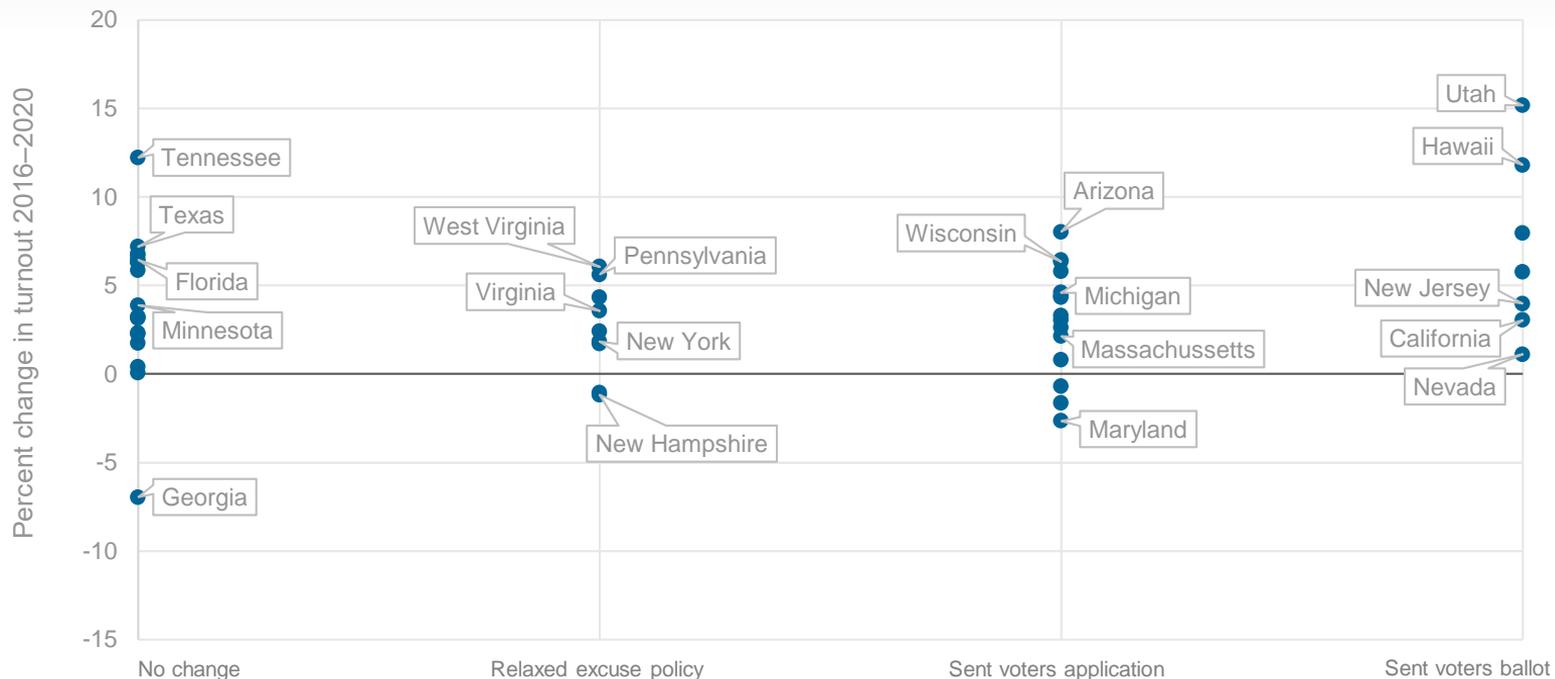
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The 2020 election was unusual in many ways

- Huge national turnout increase: 59.8% → 66.8%
- Even larger California increase: 58.7% → 70.9%
- Record mail ballot use in California: 57.8% → 86.7%

States that switched to mailing ballots saw big increases



No clear pattern occurred for county approaches to in-person voting



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Many changes happened around the 2020 election besides mail ballot policies

- Effect of mail ballot access policy: national comparison
- Account for:
 - Other policy changes (esp. AVR)
 - COVID case load
 - State competitiveness
 - 2020 turnout surge
 - Permanent differences between counties
 - Differences in county turnout trends *before* 2020

Mailing voters a ballot has the largest positive effect

| | 2020 | | 1992–2016 | |
|--|--------|-----------------|-----------|-----------------|
| | Effect | Margin of Error | Effect | Margin of Error |
| Mailing all voters a ballot | | | | |
| Overall effect | 4.6% | +/-1.2% | 3.9% | +/-1.0% |
| Effect for precinct voters | 10.6% | +/-2.6% | 9.6% | +/-2.4% |
| No-excuse mail voting | | | | |
| | -2.7% | +/-0.6% | 1.0% | +/-0.4% |
| Mailing all voters a vote-by-mail application | | | | |
| | 1.7% | +/-0.6% | 0.8% | +/-0.2% |

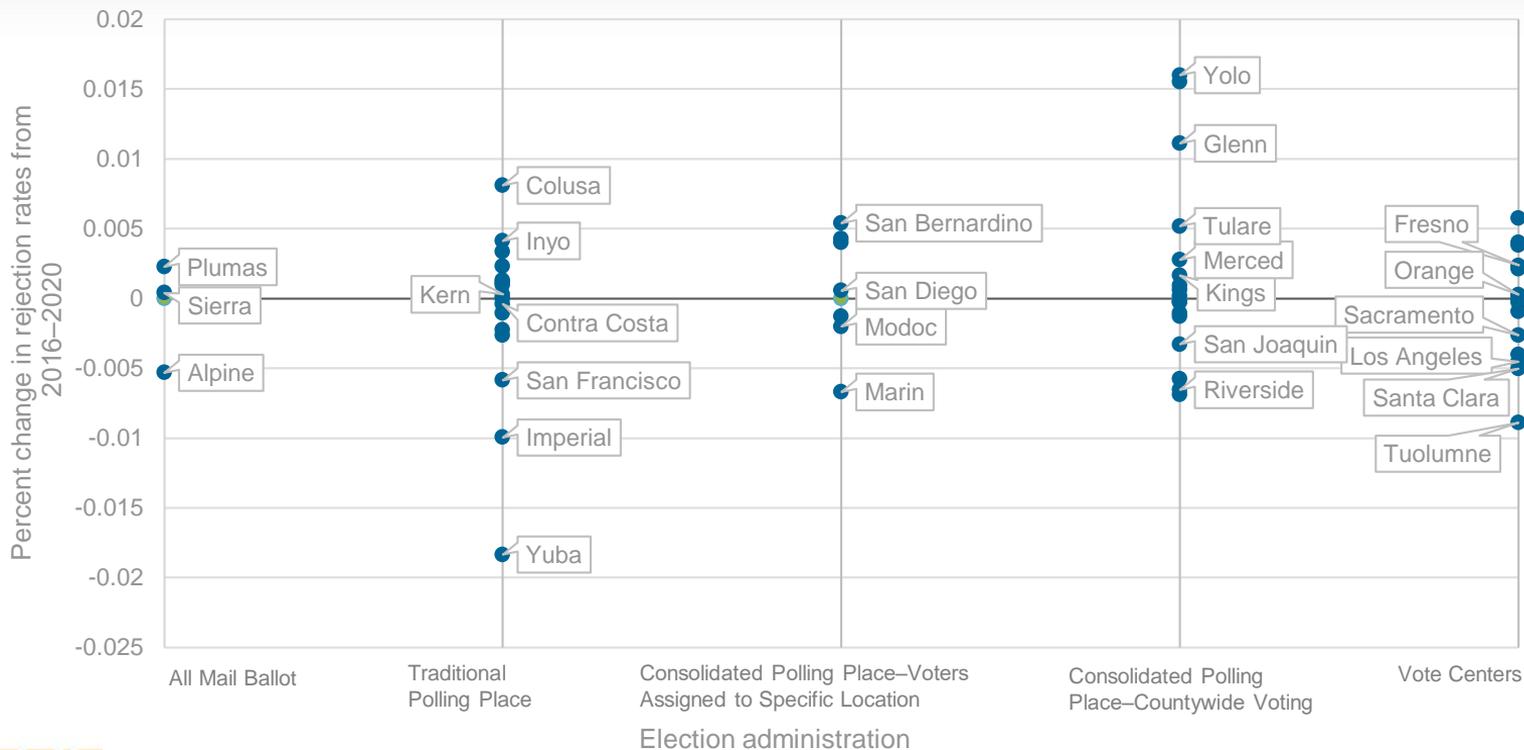
There may be other explanations for county policy effects in California

- Effect of in-person policy: within-California comparison
- Account for:
 - 2020 turnout surge
 - Permanent differences between counties
 - Differences in county turnout trends *before* 2020
 - Number of drop boxes and in-person voting locations

Countywide access to voting locations led to a small boost in turnout

| | Effect | Margin of Error |
|--------------------------|--------|-----------------|
| VCA | 1.5% | +/-1.8% |
| Consolidated Precincts | | |
| Countywide access | 1.4% | +/-2.0% |
| Neighborhood-only access | -0.8% | +/-2.4% |

Rejection rates were unrelated to county voting approach



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Conclusions

- Most consistently positive effect: mailing ballots
 - Other access policies have less effect
- Most positive effect among in-person policies: countywide access
 - But this is smaller and more ambiguous
- Rejection rates marginally better in CA
 - Statewide not local policy (if anything)

Policy recommendations

- Mailing a ballot accomplishes most turnout benefit
- Other policy choices more ambiguous

- No conclusions in this study about
 - Administrative benefits or costs
 - Equity effects

Notes on the use of these slides

These slides were created to accompany a presentation. They do not include full documentation of sources, data samples, methods, and interpretations. To avoid misinterpretations, please contact:

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Thank you for your interest in this work.