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

- 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

Percent change in turnout 2016‒2020

-8 -4 -2 0 2 4 6 8 10 12

All Mail Ballot Traditional Polling Place Consolidated Polling Place-Voters Assigned to Specific Location Consolidated Polling Place-Countywide Voting Vote Centers

- Alpine
- Plumas
- Sierra
- Imperial
- Kern
- Contra Costa
- San Francisco
- Inyo
- Modoc
- Marin
- San Bernardino
- San Diego
- San Luis Obispo
- San Benito
- Merced
- San Joaquin
- Kings
- Ventura
- Santa Cruz
- Santa Clara
- Los Angeles
- Sacramento
- Orange
- Fresno
- Tuolumne
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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

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<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mailing all voters a ballot</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>+/-1.2%</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
<td>+/-1.0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Overall effect</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
<td>+/-2.6%</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
<td>+/-2.4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Effect for precinct voters</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No-excuse mail voting</td>
<td>-2.7%</td>
<td>+/-0.6%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>+/-0.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mailing all voters a vote-by-mail application</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>+/-0.6%</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
<td>+/-0.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Effect</th>
<th>Margin of Error</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>VCA</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>+/-1.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consolidated Precincts</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Countywide access</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>+/-2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood-only access</td>
<td>-0.8%</td>
<td>+/-2.4%</td>
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</table>
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
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.