How Greater Vote-by-Mail Influences California Voter Turnout

September 10, 2020

Eric McGhee, Jennifer Paluch, and Mindy Romero

Supported with funding from Craig Newmark Philanthropies
Pandemic voting presents unprecedented challenges

- Voters risk virus transmission by voting in person
- Poll workers run same risks but encounter even more people
  - More likely to come from vulnerable populations for the virus
- Will be very difficult to staff the same number of in-person locations
Solutions involve less in-person voting

- Most states encouraging voting by mail to address pandemic
- California mailing every voter a vote-by-mail ballot
  - Many counties will limit in-person options
  - More drop boxes and early voting options
- What happens when a county shifts to this model?
Outline

- Test case: the California Voter’s Choice Act
  - Who votes with higher vote by mail?
  - When and how do voters vote?
  - Conclusions and policy recommendations
The pandemic model has been tested

- The California “Voter’s Choice Act” (VCA) has been used in 15 counties
VCA implemented in 15 counties in 2 waves
The pandemic model has been tested

- The California “Voter’s Choice Act” has been used in 15 counties

- The model
  - All voters receive a vote-by-mail ballot
  - “Vote centers” replace polling places
  - Some early voting and drop boxes must be available

- Closest comparison to voting this fall
Outline

- Test case: the California Voter’s Choice Act
- Who votes with higher vote by mail?
- When and how do voters vote?
- Conclusions and policy recommendations
The VCA boosted turnout overall
Turnout has increased for many but not all groups.
Partisan differences in turnout change are small
Outline

- Test case: the California Voter’s Choice Act
- Who votes with higher vote by mail?
- When and how do voters vote?
- Conclusions and policy recommendations
Return of mailed ballots is spread out over time
Vote center ballots are concentrated near Election Day
Foreign language voters are more likely to mail ballots

![Bar chart showing voting methods and languages]

- **Dropped at drop box**
  - English: 20%
  - Other languages: 10%

- **Dropped at vote center**
  - English: 20%
  - Other languages: 10%

- **Mailed**
  - English: 70%
  - Other languages: 80%

- **Voted at vote center**
  - English: 10%
  - Other languages: 10%
Seniors are more likely to mail ballots
Racial/ethnic differences in voting method are small.
Outline

- Test case: the California Voter’s Choice Act
- Who votes with higher vote by mail?
- When and how do voters vote?
- Conclusions and policy recommendations
Conclusions and policy recommendations

- Higher turnout under VCA is promising, but doesn’t guarantee fall outcome
- Certain groups have shown signs of needing extra outreach
  - In-person foreign language, by-mail renters in both primaries
  - New and young registrants in 2020 primary
  - Best method and content of outreach depends on group
- Mail voting tends to be very spread out
  - In-person and drop box more concentrated near Election Day
  - May need to encourage early voting to reduce risk
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:

Eric McGhee (mcghee@ppic.org; 415-291-4439)

Thank you for your interest in this work.