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**Administering Democracy: Public Opinion on
Election Reform in California**

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Abstract

During the 2008 presidential election in California 5,722,465 voters voted by mail, representing 41.64% of all registered voters in the state. Given the historic number of mail ballots and the increasing propensity for voters in California and elsewhere to choose this voting method, some basic questions are asked: Do voters favor expanding mail balloting? How will registrants who chose to vote at a polling place react when they are required to vote by mail? Does voting method affect voter's confidence in the election system? Is there a difference in confidence levels among those required to vote by mail vs. self-selected absentee voters? Who do voters turn to for information regarding the election process, i.e., about how to cast their ballot? California offers researchers a unique quasi-experimental setting to answer these questions because of a discontinuity in the state Election Code that forces some registrants to vote by mail while other similar registrants are allowed to vote at a polling place. Data from two surveys are used: a statewide survey of both polling place and mail voters conducted by the Field Poll, and a five-county survey of only mail voters conducted by the Survey Policy Research Institute.

Keywords: voting, elections, election reform, vote-by-mail

Administering Democracy: Public Opinion on Election Reform in California

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Introduction

Increasing numbers of Californians are choosing to vote by mail. In November 2008 over 5.7 million voters cast their ballot by mail, up from 4.1 million in 2004. Election officials also increasingly favor mail ballot elections for reasons that include cost and efficiency (Oremus 2008). Lawmakers in the state capitol are seeking to keep up with the demand. Most recently, in February 2011, State Senator Christine Kehoe introduced a bill that would allow San Diego County to conduct mail-only elections as part of a five-year pilot program.¹ A member of the San Diego County Board of Supervisors estimates that voting by mail saves \$3.5 million per election (Slater-Price 2011).² Growth in the numbers of registrants choosing to vote by mail will likely continue, especially as the cost of elections continues to draw attention, nevertheless a majority of voters are still polling place voters. Of almost 14 million total votes cast in California's last presidential election, slightly more than 8 million were cast in a precinct. Anecdotal information suggests that changing to mail-only balloting may not be popular. "This week I and about 86,000 other people in Santa Clara County were notified that our polling places have been closed . . . I'm not happy to be among them" (Fisher 2008).

This research investigates public opinion on the topic of election reform, and specifically reform aimed at expanding mail-only elections. What is voter opinion about potential changes in the way elections are administered in California? Will voters approve of changing election methods from in-person polling place voting to mail-only voting? Are there socio-demographic variations in voter opinion on this issue? These are important questions as policymakers in California and around the nation consider the expanded use of all mail elections. To answer these and other related questions, I conducted a quasi-experimental study of polling place

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voters who were required to vote by mail. My analysis reveals that after having the experience of being “required” to vote by mail their support for all-mail balloting paralleled those of voters who voluntarily chose to vote by mail. Results show that election reforms allowing for the expansion of mail elections do not cause significant voter disapproval.

This article proceeds as follows. First, I briefly summarize the somewhat limited literature regarding public opinion on voting by mail. Second, I describe the theoretical basis for examining public reaction to changing election methods. Third, I describe the methodology and survey employed in this analysis. Finally, I analyze the findings and conclude with a discussion of the implications of my study.

Literature and Theory

Scholars (Baretto et al. 2006; 226) have noted that “there are very few systematic studies of absentee voters,” and there are virtually none that analyze those voters *required* to cast their ballot by mail only. The spread of alternative voting methods has happened in the United States in large measure for three reasons (Fitzgerald 2005); widespread interest in promoting voter participation, a desire on the part of election officials to reduce administrative burdens, and public enthusiasm. I focus here on public enthusiasm, an area of scholarship where the evidence is more anecdotal than empirical as little research is available on the preferences voters have for the different options available for administering elections (Alvarez, Hall, and Llewellyn 2008b). Early studies that surveyed voters about vote by mail asked only about the mode of voting (e.g., “will you vote by mail or in person”) not about their opinion about the voting method itself (see for example, Karp and Banducci 2001, Southwell and Burchett 1997). However, in 2003 Southwell (2004) specifically asked Oregon voters their preferences between the two modes of elections, polling place versus vote by mail, finding 80.9% supported voting by mail.³ The high level of support among Oregon voters is not surprising because of the length of time residents have been exposed to this method of voting. Some recent scholarship corroborates this, finding that voters living in states where all-mail balloting is used are significantly more likely to support such a voting method (Hall et al. 2009). On the other hand, polling place voters in Washington reported little support for switching to mail-only elections (Barreto and Pump 2007).⁴ The findings from the literature lead to some preliminary conclusions; (1) a large majority of voters having long experience/history (i.e., Oregon) with voting by mail are supportive of it, (2) voters in states that have some elections conducted by mail-only are supportive of voting by mail, and (3) habitual polling place voters do not support mail-only elections. I theorize that voter (dis)approval for this type of election modification is conditioned by two things (a) expectations and (b) experience.

Voter Expectations

The consumer behavior literature offers a model for understanding how citizen opinion of prior habitual behavior, such as voting (Southwell 2010), might be affected by a new way of doing things. Expectancy disconfirmation is a model widely used in private sector analysis of customer satisfaction; Van Ryzin (2005) applied it successfully in the field of public administration. Expectancy disconfirmation theory tells us that consumers form judgments about products and services based on prior expectations. After experiencing the product or service, such expectations serve as a comparative referent for the satisfaction judgment. The gap between the prior expectation and the actual experience is the “expectancy disconfirmation,” which can be positive or negative. Citizens’ evaluations of individual local government service delivery can be analyzed in this way. Van Ryzin’s (2005: 601) work finds a direct positive effect of expectations on satisfaction “which may occur when citizens are unaware or unable to judge the performance of local government services, or assimilate their satisfaction judgments to their previously held expectations for reasons of dissonance reduction or ego defensiveness.” This suggests that registrants are likely satisfied with their current method of voting. Furthermore, Van Ryzin found strong support for the idea that citizen expectations have a large negative effect on disconfirmation, that is, they are predisposed to be skeptical of new products or services. This provides the basis for the following hypothesis:

H1: polling place voters will not approve of changing to mail only elections.

Voter Experience

Next, I look to the field of education for learning models that could be helpful in explaining voter (dis)approval for election reform such as mail-only balloting. The education literature notes a difference between simply being told how to do something and having the experience of actually doing it. As Haste (2004: 425) points out “the ‘knowledge’ model presumes that information *of itself* will lead to understanding *and* to appropriate motivation; appropriate civic knowledge will motivate civic participation. In contrast the ‘praxis’ model assumes that practical and theoretical knowledge, and particularly the motivation to use them, are acquired through actively engaging with relevant tasks.” (Italics in the original.) This leads to the second hypothesis that will be tested:

H2: voters required to vote by mail in the studied election will plan to vote by mail (voluntarily) in the next election.

Finally, establishing whether there are differences across voter groups is important as Field Poll data (2009)⁵ shows precinct voters include a larger share of Democrats (46%) than Republicans (30%); while mail voters include a larger percentage of conservatives (33%) than liberals (25%). Across age and ethnicity the Field Poll shows 53% of mail voters in California were age 50 or older, and 70% were white non-Hispanics as compared to 65% of precinct voters. Lastly, among mail ballot voters in 2008, 54% were women and 51% were men. Therefore, I hypothesize that there are significant socio-demographic differences across voters. The third hypothesis is:

H3: mail voters are significantly different socio-demographically from polling place voters.

Methodology

I used a quasi-experimental research design to examine two groups of registrants that are self-defined by the (pre-election) voting method they chose: (1) polling place voters who chose to vote in person, and (2) absentee voters who voluntarily chose to vote by mail. One group, the polling place voters, receives an intervention or “treatment.” The treatment is to be assigned to a mail-only precinct.⁶ For the November 2008 election the treated voters could not vote at a polling place, they had to vote by mail. Voters required to vote by mail are hereafter referred to as “mandatory mail voters.”

Scholars (Bergman and Yates 2011, Kousser and Mullin 2007, Meredith and Malhotra 2008) have previously used California as an experimental test-bed for questions about voting by mail. Because of a provision in the state Election Code,⁷ a local election official (LEO) can consolidate voters into mail-only precincts when there are less than 250 registrants in a precinct.⁸ In any given election in a county mandatory mail voters are randomly selected by the election administrator.⁹ Through this assignment by the LEO one can “test” what will happen to registrants who are required to vote by mail.

Data

I compared survey results from the Survey and Policy Research Institute (SPRI) survey of mail voters to a statewide Field Poll of all voters. By arrangement with The Field Poll, similar questions were inserted there for the author. The SPRI survey was conducted by telephone by SPRI at San Jose State University January 19 and 20, 2009. The survey of 473 mail voters from five California counties (i.e., Alameda, Fresno, Marin, Santa Clara, and San Mateo) has a sampling error of +/- 5%

at a 95% confidence level and a response rate of 49%. SPRI purchased a statewide database of registered voters and drew a random sample of voters from the five counties who were then screened for whether they voted by mail in the November 2008 election. All registered voters in the five counties were given an equal probability to be included in the study, as opposed to only surveying voters “flagged” as absentee voters by the statewide database. An additional screening question was used to identify self-selected absentee voters versus mandatory mail voters: “In thinking about the last election on November 4, 2008, did you vote by mail or did you vote in person at your polling place?” (See the appendix for the full wording of all questions used in this study.) Overall, the SPRI survey counties have among the highest percentage of mail voters in the state, as evidenced in Table 1, and are diverse with representative concentrations of Hispanic, Asian, and African-American voters mirroring the statewide profile.¹⁰

The Field Poll of 761 voters was completed February 20-March 1, 2009 by telephone. The sample was developed from telephone listings of individual voters selected randomly from a listing of statewide voter registration rolls. Interviews were conducted on either a voter’s landline or cell phone. The sample was stratified to yield interviews with approximately equal numbers of Democrats and Republicans. Data were weighted to known parameters of the statewide registered voter population. The sampling error is +/- 3.6% at the 95% confidence level; 59.6% voted in person at a polling place and 37% were absentee voters (3.1% voted early in-person at pre-assigned locations). Unfortunately, the response rate for this survey is not available. Together these surveys provide the researcher the opportunity to assess voter support for election reform, taking account of the full electorate of polling place, absentee voters, and mandatory mail voters, using many of the same political and demographic questions across both survey instruments.

Findings

I am interested in answering three basic questions: (1) Do voters (dis)approve of expanding mail balloting in California? (2) Is (dis)approval conditioned on a registrant’s prior voting experience? (3) Can exposure to vote-by-mail alter polling place voter sentiment? To answer these questions I compare polling place, voluntary absentee, and mandatory mail voters.

First, to get an initial sense of the absentee electorate and the popularity of this voting method, I assess how people vote, why people currently vote early, as well as why they say they will use this technique in the future.

Among all voters in the state, Field Poll data indicates that a small majority of voters (50.3%) reported voting at the polls, and 43.6% reported voting early or by mail. Among those that voted early in the five-county SPRI study (Table 2), the

Table 1. Voter Turnout by Method in Select Counties, November 2008

| County | Mail Voters | Precinct Voters | Total Turnout | Mail vs. Precinct |
|-------------|-------------|-----------------|---------------|-------------------|
| Alameda | 82.32% | 74.66% | 78.27% | 7.66% |
| Fresno | 75.35% | 68.74% | 71.98% | 6.61% |
| Marin | 87.50% | 96.29% | 90.80% | -8.79% |
| San Mateo | 73.61% | 83.93% | 78.86% | -10.32% |
| Santa Clara | 83.68% | 91.49% | 85.96% | -7.82% |
| California | 84.00% | 76.00% | 79.42% | 8.05% |

Source: Joe Holland, Clerk, Santa Barbara Registrar-Recorder

biggest motivation is convenience (44.%). When these voters were asked about what most influenced whether or not they will go to the polls in the future, results presented in Table 3 show that 18.8% like to vote at the polls, and the rest wanted to avoid lines at the polls (8.9%) or location difficulties (10.1% from 3 items cumulatively), or taking time away from work (12.3%).¹¹

Next, I examine findings related to my hypotheses. The first hypothesis is that prior voting experience (polling place) will negatively impact approval for change to a new voting method (mail-only). Side-by-side frequency results are presented in Table 4 for each survey. Field Poll results for the question¹² about expanding the use of mail-only elections in California indicate support for this hypothesis (Pearson $\chi^2 = 148.675$; $p = .000$); 54.8% of polling place voters disapprove of such a policy compared with 29.2% of absentee voters, a gap of 25.6 percentage points. Among those expressing support for expanding the use of mail-only elections, 65.4% of absentee voters compared to 41.8% of polling place voters approved, a 23.6% gap.

Can being exposed to vote-by-mail change polling place voter sentiment? The second hypothesis was that experiencing mail balloting could have a positive effect on polling place voter approval for mail balloting. Looking at the results for the same question in the SPRI survey shows that 63.8% support the use of mail-only elections. Additionally, there is no significant difference between the voluntary absentee voters and the mandatory mail voters where the gap is a mere 0.40%, indicating that once polling place voters have had the experience of voting by mail they approve of election reforms expanding the use of mail-only elections at the same level of those who have chosen to vote by mail. (The lack of significance may seem counterintuitive, but the null result is in fact the expected result if we are to answer the research question about whether voter experience matters in the affirmative.)

Table 2. Which of the following factors was the MOST important consideration that influenced you to vote by mail?

| SPRI Survey | Percent |
|--|----------------|
| It is convenient to my schedule | 44.6 |
| Vote early because I don't have to travel to polls | 6.6 |
| Vote early because it gives me time to mark ballot | 10.8 |
| Another reason | 36.8 |
| Refused | 1.3 |
| Total | 100 |

Table 3. Thinking about how you will vote in the future, which of the following factors will be the MOST important consideration on whether or not you will go to a polling place on Election Day?

| SPRI Survey | Percent |
|--------------------------------------|----------------|
| I like to vote in person | 18.8 |
| To avoid lines at the polls | 8.9 |
| The location is too far | 5.1 |
| Polls hard to find / in bad location | 4.2 |
| Limited parking at polling place | .8 |
| Time away from work | 12.3 |
| Time away from family | 6.6 |
| Another reason | 40.6 |
| Refused | 2.7 |
| Total | 100.0 |

The third hypothesis speculated that socio-demographic differences exist between polling place and mail voters. The characteristics of each group of voters are tabulated for six socio-demographic variables: race/ethnicity, age, gender, ideology, education, and income. In addition, to gauge political preferences among voters, perceptions respondents have about the state of affairs in California and the nation, as well as vote intention for the incumbent U.S. senator from California, are also examined (Field Poll only). Political preference for the incumbent senator between polling place and mail voters are not significant. Nor are views about whether the state is headed in the right direction or whether the nation is on the right track. However, significant race/ethnicity¹³ and age¹⁴ differences exist across

Table 4: Socio-Demographic and Political Preference Comparison of Polling Place and Mail Voters

| | Field Poll Statewide Results 2009 | | | SPRI Results 2009 | | |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------|------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|------------|
| | % Absentee Voter | % Polling Place | Difference | % Voluntary Mail Voter | % Mandatory Mail Voter | Difference |
| White | 82.5 | 71.8 | 10.70 *** | 63.5 | 72.3 | -8.80 * |
| Latino | 13.3 | 20.4 | -7.10 *** | 5.6 | 8.5 | -2.90 * |
| Black | 2.7 | 6.3 | -3.60 | 3.5 | 1.1 | 2.40 * |
| Asian | 5.1 | 5.5 | -0.40 | 9.8 | 2.7 | 7.10 * |
| Female | 55.1 | 49.1 | 6.00 | 50.4 | 61.2 | -10.80 * |
| Under 40 years old | 13.6 | 25.3 | -11.70 *** | 15.4 | 13.8 | 1.6 |
| 41-59 years old | 33.1 | 40.5 | -7.40 *** | 35.4 | 49.5 | -14.10 ** |
| Over 60 years old | 48.5 | 29.5 | 19.00 *** | 47 | 32.4 | 14.6 ** |
| College | 74.7 | 76.2 | -1.50 | 67.4 | 69.7 | -2.30 |
| Under \$75,000 | | | | 29.1 | 23.9 | 5.20 |
| Over \$75,000 | | | | 36.5 | 42 | -5.50 |
| Under \$60,000 | 41.3 | 37.6 | 3.70 | | | |
| \$60,000 to \$100,000 | 19.6 | 23.5 | -3.90 | | | |
| Over \$100,000 | 26.2 | 26.9 | -0.70 | | | |
| US on Wrong Track | 24.1 | 25.1 | -1.00 | | | |
| US on Right Track | 21.7 | 21.4 | 0.30 | | | |
| Will Vote for Sen. Boxer | 43.4 | 38.6 | 4.80 | | | |
| Not Vote for Sen. Boxer | 45.2 | 46 | -0.80 | | | |
| CA Going Right Direction | 7.2 | 9.1 | -1.90 | | | |
| CA Going Wrong Direction | 34 | 36.3 | -2.30 | | | |
| Conservative | 33.4 | 33.2 | 0.20 | 22.5 | 21.3 | 1.20 |
| Liberal | 20.2 | 20.6 | -0.40 | 33.7 | 34 | -0.30 |
| Middle of Road/Moderate | 30.4 | 23.5 | 6.90 * | 34 | 35.1 | -1.10 |
| Mail only elections-Approve | 65.4 | 41.8 | 23.60 * | 64.2 | 63.8 | 0.40 |
| Mail only elections-Disapprove | 29.2 | 54.8 | -25.60 * | 31.2 | 33 | -1.80 |
| N | 761 | | | 473 | | |

*x2 significant at p < .05.

**x2 significant at p < .01.

*** x2 significant at p < .001.

all voter groups (polling place, voluntary mail and mandatory mail), and gender¹⁵ in the SPRI survey. To decompose age effects on voting method preference and assignment, separate chi-square tests were performed on three age groupings (under 40 years of age, 41 to 59, and over 60 years of age); results indicate that voters under 40 years of age are significantly more likely to be polling place voters (Field Poll), but there is no significant difference between voluntary and mandatory mail voters under 40 (SPRI Survey). Older voters over 60 years of age use mail balloting

significantly more than other voters (Field Poll: 48.5% and SPRI: 47%). Education and income are not significant in either the Field Poll or the SPRI survey.

From these results the hypothesis that mail voters are significantly different socio-demographically from polling place voters is partially confirmed. Partial confirmation of this hypothesis means that registrant voting method choice is conditioned by only two socio-demographic factors, age and ethnicity. However, voting method cannot be attributed to variations in the education or income of voters. This is a somewhat anomalous finding as previous studies have found that absentee voters are considerably older and better educated than polling place voters. To further investigate the differences in the composition of the absentee and polling place electorate, I compare ideological affiliation. There is a significant difference (Pearson $\chi^2 = 158.785$; $p = .000$) in the ideology of polling place and absentee voters in the Field Poll; interestingly this is true among moderates and not conservatives as would be expected. This finding is supported by other work (Barreto et al. 2006) that found no Republican skew among absentee voters. There is no significant difference in the ideological composition of the absentee and mandatory mail voters in the SPRI survey. Although there are some socio-demographic differences between mail and polling places voters, whether these translate into differing opinions on the issue of election reform is the question. I address this in the next section.

Testing Praxis

To ascertain the extent of the preliminary findings about a learning effect discussed above, I modeled voter approval using Probit. The dependent variable is APPROVAL (coded 1) for more mail-only elections and (coded 0) for disapproval. (See footnote 12 for exact wording.) A positive sign would indicate support for election reform. I control for standard socio-demographic factors including ideology, race, age, gender, income, and education. The key predictor variable is being required to vote by mail (“COMPEL”); the treatment is coded “1.” The expectation for COMPEL is positive, indicating that treated voters manifest approval for expanding provisions in state law to allow for wider use of mail-only elections. To test whether the current election experience has led to a learning effect, evidence for “praxis,” voters were asked how they intend to vote in the next election “NEXTVOTE” (coded 0 for by mail and 1 for in-person at a polling place). The expectation for NEXTVOTE is positive indicating precinct voter support for the election reform in the study.

Results are presented in Table 5 and show that the model is very effective, correctly predicting 73% of the cases and yielding a proportional reduction of error (Goodman-Kruskal’s t-c) of .36%, a significant improvement over a null hypothesis of random proportional assignment outcomes. The effect of being a mandatory mail

Table 5: SPRI Survey Probit Estimates of Voter Approval for More Mail-Only Elections

| Approval | Coefficient | Std. Err. | P> z | Min -> Max |
|-----------------|--------------------|------------------|-----------------|----------------------|
| Compel | -0.0668247 | 0.2534993 | 0.792 | -0.0139 |
| NextVote | -1.115374 | 0.3374911 | 0.001 | -0.2584 |
| White | -0.1509112 | 0.3126308 | 0.629 | -0.0307 |
| Female | -0.3114909 | 0.2521183 | 0.217 | -0.0641 |
| LowIncome | -0.0960122 | 0.3896452 | 0.805 | -0.0202 |
| HighIncome | -0.0808798 | 0.3281157 | 0.805 | -0.0167 |
| IncMissing | 0.0208056 | 0.3269015 | 0.949 | 0.0043 |
| Age | -0.0003096 | 0.0085849 | 0.971 | -0.0049 |
| Educate | 0.1090324 | 0.1207293 | 0.366 | 0.1402 |
| Ideology | -0.1641373 | 0.1887525 | 0.385 | -0.0686 |
| Democrat | 0.0931603 | 0.2912754 | 0.749 | 0.0193 |
| Trust | 0.5225512 | 0.1505082 | 0.001 | 0.3606 |
| Constant | -0.6438266 | 1.010521 | 0.524 | |

N = 360

Log likelihood = -205.47341

Chi2 = 32.21

PPC = 73.1

PRE (*t-c*) = .365

p < .001, two-tailed tests.

voter (COMPEL) on approval for election reform is negative but insignificant. The importance of the finding is the putative lack of difference between the mandatory mail voters and the voluntary absentee voters overall; they have no discernable difference of attitude toward changes in election law regardless of their voting method. Therefore, having the experience of being required to vote by mail does not have a significantly adverse affect on how voters feel about mail balloting. None of the socio-demographic variables are significant; NEXTVOTE and TRUST are the only significant (*p* = .001) variables in the equation. Among those who intend to vote at a polling place in the next election, NEXTVOTE, there is little approval for expanding the use of mail balloting. (TRUST is discussed in the next section.)

To determine the substantive effect of the model results, predicted probabilities were calculated and are reported in columns adjacent to the relevant parameter estimates. The predicted probability of a polling place voter who claims they will use that mode of voting for the next election, approval for more elections to be mail-

Table 6. Praxis Effects

SPRI Survey: In the next election, will you plan to vote by mail or vote in person at the polling place?

| | Chose to vote by mail | Mandatory vote-by-mail |
|----------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Vote by mail | 86.0% | 77.7% |
| Vote in person | 9.8% | 20.2% |
| Refused | 4.2% | 2.1% |

only is 26% less than a voluntary absentee voter. Crosstabs of the two variables (COMPEL and NEXTVOTE) shown in Table 6 reveals that while polling place voters are less likely to vote by mail again, 77.7% say they are planning to do so in the next election, a huge positive learning effect on the expected behavior of polling place voters. This is an important result of the experiment as it shows that voters expected to be unreceptive to the process of mail balloting because they were forced into that method of voting are not opposed to voting by mail in the future after having had first-hand experience with the process. Taken together, these two measures show that even unwanted exposure to voting methods can result in a learning experience without harming voters' views about election processes overall.

Despite the convincing results of the analysis there may be some concerns about the internal validity of the model that warrant further investigation. First, it is possible that COMPEL and NEXTVOTE may be measuring the same thing as both are addressing voting by mail—although COMPEL is addressing the present and NEXTVOTE is addressing the future. Obviously, however, the future is conditioned by what happens in the present. Nevertheless, tests indicate that COMPEL and NEXTVOTE are not the same thing. The variables are not highly correlated (.1469), and further, when an interactive variable combining the two is created and inserted into the model it is not significant, showing no interactive effect between NEXTVOTE and COMPEL. A second potential concern is the possibility that the dependent variable is on both sides of the equation because, with NEXTVOTE as the independent variable, this is asking whether a voter approves of the method enough to use it again in the next election, and in essence this is a manifestation of approval for the process. Correlation coefficients (-.2370) illustrate that NEXTVOTE is not in fact a proxy for the dependent variable.

Confidence of Mandatory Mail Voters: Belief in Election Administration

Does voting method affect voter's confidence in the election system? Is there a difference in confidence levels among those required to vote by mail vs. self-selected absentee voters? Does confidence affect approval for election reforms?

The survey question asked: “How confident are you that each vote is accurately counted and processed by the county?” (Respondents had these options: “very confident,” “somewhat confident,” “a little confident,” and “not at all confident.”)¹⁶ This question is designed to gauge feelings about election system integrity. Results are displayed in Table 7 alongside recent work of others. The top line of the “very confident” responses shows our results to be in the middle, between the local (42%) and national (58%) figures, with no significant difference between our two groups of mail voters (voluntary—51.6% and mandatory—52.7%). I then combined the “very confident” with the “somewhat confident” voters and report those results. This reveals a of -5.8%.gap between those required to vote by mail and those who chose it in the SPRI sample, but a smaller -3.1 between the SPRI and local samples.

However, during their November 2007 survey, Hall et al. (2008) noted that respondents hesitated before giving answers to this question so an open-ended question was added in 2008. Open-ended responses that they obtained support a similar finding by others (Atkeson and Saunders 2007; 658) indicating that lower levels of voter confidence among absentee voters could be due to a disconnect between the voter and Election Day activities, something described as “separation from the final moment of the process.” I included a question to test this possibility: “How confident are you that each ballot is delivered safely to the county during the vote by mail process?” (Again, respondents had these options: “very confident,” “somewhat confident,” “a little confident,” and “not at all confident.”) Results in Table 7 show that voter confidence in the delivery of their ballots is higher for both voluntary (63.5%) and mandatory (55.3%) mail voters than their confidence about their vote being counted, and the pattern continues when the “somewhat confident” are included in these numbers (88.4% and 82.4% respectively).

To answer the question of whether voter confidence affects voter (dis)approval for mail-only elections, I return to the results displayed in Table 5. In the probit model of voter (dis)approval for this type of election reform, we collapsed the two questions about confidence in ballot delivery and counting votes into one TRUST variable. The rationale for this is that these questions could be measuring the same underlying dimension (.7912 correlation); computing Cronbach’s Alpha (> .7) validates this concern. The new TRUST variable is significant ($p = .001$) and indicates that, with increasing levels of trust, approval for the expanded use of mail-only increases 36% across both groups of voters.

Casting About for Vote Casting Information: Where Do Voters Turn?

Finally, I turn to the question of where voters get information regarding the election process itself, i.e., about how to cast their ballot.

Table 7. Frequency Comparison of Voter Confidence: California, Local, and National Samples

| | SPRI California 2009 | | Atkeson Local 2006 | Pew National 2006 |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|
| | % Voluntary Mail Ballot | % Mandatory Mail Ballot | | % All Voters |
| Very Confident vote counted | 51.6 | 52.7 | 42 | 58 |
| Confident* vote counted | 86.7 | 80.9 | 84 | 87 |
| Very Confident ballot delivered | 63.5 | 55.3 | | |
| Confident* ballot delivered | 88.4 | 82.4 | | |

*very and somewhat confident combined

Table 8. How Voters Get Election Process Information

SPRI Survey: In the last election on November 4, 2008, did you CHOOSE to vote by mail, or were you ASSIGNED to a mandatory vote-by-mail precinct?

| | | Chose to vote by mail | Mandatory vote by mail |
|---|---|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| We are interested in learning more about how people get information about elections and voting. When you have heard or talked about the actual process of elections, that is, how to cast your vote, what sources of information have you used? | Friends, family, or coworkers | 24.2% | 30.9% |
| | Media (e.g. TV, newspapers, or radio) | 41.8% | 36.7% |
| | Groups you belong to (e.g. unions, churches, clubs) | 4.6% | 6.9% |
| | Elected officials (in public meetings or mailings, for example) | 11.2% | 5.9% |
| | Other | 16.5% | 18.1% |
| | Refused | 1.8% | 1.6% |

Voters were asked how they get information about elections and voting, specifically: “When you have heard or talked about the actual process of elections, that is, how to cast your vote, what sources of information have you used?” Voters were also asked what they considered to be the most reliable source of information. Tables 8 and 9 present the results across the two voter groups. (Chi-square tests show no significance.) The media is a resource for both voter groups (41.8% of voluntary mail voters and 36.7% for mandatory mail voters) as is family (24.2% of voluntary mail voters and 30.9% for mandatory mail voters), but neither is not considered the most reliable source for either group.

When voters were asked about what they consider to be the most reliable source of information about how and where to cast a ballot the largest response for most reliable information was “other” with 33.3% and 38.8% across the two voter groups. Upon further investigation of the open-end responses to “other” two main types of responses were revealed—“myself” or “own decision” is one, and the second is “information pamphlet,” “mailed information,” and “government” all of which can arguably be classified as being in the category of “elected officials.” Summing the elected officials and other categories together, 40.3% of those who chose to vote by mail and 52.1% of those required to vote by mail believe election officials are the most reliable source of information when it comes to questions related to election processes about how and where to cast a ballot. That a majority of those required to vote by mail have this view is an interesting and informative finding. A majority of voters faced with a novel and possibly unwelcome change in election administration are still disposed to look to LEO’s for the most reliable information about the process. Election officials have at least as much, if not more, goodwill among voters as the media.

Discussion

This research has demonstrated a number of important findings. First, perhaps not surprisingly, precinct voters do not approve of election reforms that make mail-balloting more available. Expectancy disconfirmation theory suggests that this result is predictable as people like what they are used to and what they know. Second, precinct voters who have hands-on experience (even when “forced” to do so) with voting by mail express support for the expansion of such systems—surprisingly at almost the same levels as voters who voluntarily select this option. In the experiment used in this study a significant majority of polling place registrants exposed to the treatment reported their intention to vote by mail in the future. The praxis learning model suggests that people can change opinion and behavior once they have hands-on experience. Third, these results held across most socio-demographic classifications of voters. Fourth, voter trust in two aspects of the election system (i.e.,

Table 9. Most Reliable Source of Election Process Information

SPRI Survey: In the last election on November 4th, 2008, did you CHOOSE to vote by mail, or were you ASSIGNED to a mandatory vote-by-mail precinct?

| | | Chose to vote by mail | Mandatory vote by mail |
|---|---|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Which do you consider to be the MOST RELIABLE source of information about how and where to cast your vote? | Friends, family, or coworkers | 15.1% | 9.6% |
| | Media (e.g. TV, newspapers, radio) | 33.0% | 29.3% |
| | Groups you belong to (e.g. unions, churches, clubs) | 8.4% | 5.3% |
| | Elected officials | 7.0% | 13.3% |
| | Other | 33.3% | 38.8% |
| | Refused | 3.2% | 3.7% |

vote delivery and counting) is important, as increasing levels of trust equated to a rise in election reform approval. Additionally, requiring voters to vote by mail in California did not have negative consequences for voter trust, as trust was found to exceed or be comparable to the findings of two recent studies where mail balloting was optional. Finally, while voters get information about the process of elections from many sources (mostly the media and family, respectively) election officials score high marks as the most reliable source of such procedural information.

From a policy perspective, as lawmakers and administrators consider moving forward with implementations of mail-only elections, this research provides support for the utilization of trials and pilots, especially for those voters inexperienced with casting their ballots by mail.

Appendix

Survey Questions

Field Poll

Barbara Boxer is running for re-election to the U.S. Senate next year. Are you inclined or not inclined to vote for Boxer in next year's November general election for U.S. Senate?

| | |
|--------------|---|
| INCLINED | 1 |
| NOT INCLINED | 2 |
| NO OPINION | 8 |

Thinking about this state, do you think things in California are generally going in the right direction or do you feel things are seriously off on the wrong track?

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| RIGHT DIRECTION | 1 |
| WRONG TRACK | 2 |
| NO OPINION | 8 |

Thinking back to last November's presidential election, did you happen to vote in that election or did something come up which kept you from voting?

| | |
|----------------------|---|
| VOTED | 1 |
| DID NOT VOTE | 2 |
| DON'T RECALL/REFUSED | 8 |

IF VOTED, ASK:

In that election, did you cast your vote at your local precinct polling place on Election Day or did you cast your vote early or by mail?

| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| VOTED AT LOCAL PRECINCT | 1 |
| VOTED EARLY OR BY MAIL | 2 |
| DON'T RECALL/REFUSED | 8 |

IF VOTED EARLY OR BY MAIL, ASK:

Did you vote by mail using an absentee ballot, or did you vote early at a designated early voting place set up within your County?

| | |
|--|---|
| VOTED BY MAIL OR ABSENTEE BALLOT | 1 |
| VOTED AT DESIGNATED EARLY VOTING PLACE | 2 |
| DON'T RECALL/REFUSED | 8 |

When it comes to voting in California elections, how much confidence do you have that the votes are being counted accurately—a great deal of confidence, some confidence, only a little confidence or no confidence at all?

Under current law, cities and counties may conduct local and special elections by mail under limited circumstances. New laws have been proposed that would allow more elections to be conducted by mail only. Would you approve of this strongly, approve somewhat, disapprove somewhat or disapprove strongly?

SPRI Survey

1. In talking to people about elections, we often find that a lot of people were not able to vote because they weren't properly registered, they were sick, or they just didn't have time. How about you—did you vote in the elections this past November?

| | |
|-----|---|
| Yes | 1 |
| No | 2 |

2. In thinking about the last election on November 4, 2008, did you vote by mail, or did you vote in person at your polling place?

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| Voted by mail | 1 |
| Voted in person | 2 |

3. In the last election on November 4, 2008, did you CHOOSE to vote by mail, or were you ASSIGNED to a mandatory vote-by-mail precinct?

| | |
|---|---|
| Chose to vote by mail | 1 |
| Assigned to mandatory vote-by-mail precinct | 2 |

4. Which of the following factors was the MOST important consideration that influenced you to vote by mail?

| | |
|--|---|
| It is convenient to my schedule | 1 |
| I like to vote early before Election Day because I don't have to travel to my polling place | 2 |
| I like to vote early before Election Day because it gives me plenty of time to mark the ballot | 3 |
| Other (Do not read) | 4 |

5. In the next election, will you plan to vote by mail or vote in person at the polling place?

| | |
|----------------|---|
| Vote by mail | 1 |
| Vote in person | 2 |

6. Thinking about how you will vote in the future, which of the following factors will be the MOST important consideration on whether or not you will go to a polling place on Election Day?

- | | |
|---|---|
| I like to vote in person | 1 |
| To avoid lines at the polls | 2 |
| The location is too far | 3 |
| The location is too hard to find or it is in a bad location | 4 |
| There is limited parking at the polling place | 5 |
| I don't have to take time away from work | 6 |
| I don't have to take time away from family | 7 |
| Other (Do not read) | 8 |

7. We are interested in learning more about how people get information about elections and voting. When you have heard or talked about the actual process of elections, that is, how to cast your vote, what sources of information have you used? Have you gotten information about how to cast your vote from any of the following?

- | | |
|--|---|
| Friends, family, or coworkers | 1 |
| Media (such as TV, newspapers, or radio) | 2 |
| Groups you belong to (such as unions, churches, clubs, and associations) | 3 |
| Elected officials (in public meetings or mailings, for example) | 4 |
| Other | 5 |

8. Which do you consider to be the MOST RELIABLE source of information about how and where to cast your vote?

- | | |
|--|---|
| Friends, family, or coworkers | 1 |
| Media (TV, newspapers, radio) | 2 |
| Groups you belong to (unions, churches, clubs, associations) | 3 |
| Elected officials | 4 |
| Other | 5 |

9. Now I want to ask you some questions about election administration in general. How confident are you that each ballot is delivered safely to the County during the vote by mail process?

- | | |
|----------------------|---|
| Very confident | 1 |
| Somewhat confident | 2 |
| A little confident | 3 |
| Not confident at all | 4 |

10. How confident are you that each vote is accurately counted and processed by the county?

- Very confident 1
- Somewhat confident 2
- A little confident 3
- Not confident at all 4

11. Under current law, cities and counties may conduct local and special elections by mail under limited circumstances. New laws have been proposed that would allow more elections to be conducted by mail only. Would you approve or disapprove of this?

- Approve 1
- Disapprove 2

12. When it comes to politics, do you usually think of yourself as a liberal, a conservative, or a moderate?

- Liberal 1
- Moderate 2
- Conservative 3

13. What is the highest level of school you have completed?

- Grade school or less 1
- Some high school 2
- High school graduate 3
- Some college or vocational school 4
- College graduate (BA, BS) 5
- Graduate school 6

14. What race or ethnicity do you consider yourself?

- White/European/Caucasian 1
- Hispanic/Mexican-American/Latino 2
- Asian/Middle Eastern/Pacific Islander 3
- Black/African American 4
- Other 5

15. Finally, and of course confidentially, please stop me when I mention a range that describes your annual household income.

- Less than \$25,000 per year 1
- More than \$25,000 but less than \$50,000 per year 2
- More than \$50,000 but less than \$75,000 per year 3

| | |
|--|---|
| More than \$75,000 but less than \$100,000 per year | 4 |
| More than \$100,000 but less than \$125,000 per year | 5 |
| More than \$125,000 per year | 6 |
| Refused (Do not read) | 7 |

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Notes

¹ SB 304, introduced Feb. 24, 2011, referred to Com. On E. & C.A. An act to add and repeal Section 4001 of the Elections Code.

² Cost is based on San Diego County's 1,500 polling stations and 6,000 poll workers.

³ Southwell's (2004) question: "Which type of election do you prefer – vote by mail or polling place?"

⁴ Their question: Do you think you will be more likely, or less likely to vote in future elections, when all ballots must be cast by mail?

⁵ Field Poll, January 2009 "California Opinion Index: A Digest Summarizing California trends in Voter Turnout, Mail Ballot Voting and Other Voting Trends," pp. 4-5. Retrieved from <<http://field.com.fieldpollonline/subscribers/>> on March 23, 2011.

⁶ Kousser and Mullin (2007:434): "Assignment to a mail precinct can be seen as an experimental "treatment" with a measureable effect on political participation."

⁷ California Election Code § 3005 states: "On the 88th day before the election, if there are 250 or less persons registered to vote in any precinct, the elections official may furnish each voter with a vote by mail ballot along with a statement that there will be no polling place for the election. The elections official shall also notify each voter of the location of the two nearest polling places in the event the voter chooses to return the ballot on election day. The voter shall not be required to file an application for the vote by mail ballot and the ballot shall be sent as soon as the ballots are available."

⁸ The maximum allowed by law is 1,000 registrants (Section 12223 of the Elections Code).

⁹ "Randomly" to the extent that ballot content and geography are random.

¹⁰ Los Angeles has high concentrations of minority populations but is recognized as having among the lowest percentage of mail voters (23.3%) because the county does not publicize mail-in options as much as others do (Oldham 2008).

¹¹ 40.6% said "Another reason;" the open-ended follow up question indicates these are mail-ballot precinct voters.

¹² Under current law, cities and counties may conduct local and special elections by mail under limited circumstances. New laws have been proposed that would allow more elections to be conducted by mail only. Would you approve or disapprove of this?

¹³ Field Poll: Whites, Pearson $\chi^2 = 47.44$; $p = .000$ and Latinos, Pearson $\chi^2 = 200.19$; $p = .000$. SPRI: Pearson $\chi^2 = 14.30$; $p = .05$.

¹⁴ Field Poll: Pearson $\chi^2 = 39.53$; $p = .01$. SPRI: Pearson $\chi^2 = 13.24$; $p = .01$.

¹⁵ Pearson $\chi^2 = 5.16$; $p = .05$.

¹⁶ This question closely mirrors what other scholars (Atkeson and Saunders 2007) have asked: "How confident are you that your vote in the November 2006 election will be counted as you intended?" and from a Pew poll in 2006 (as cited in Atkeson and Saunders 2007) "How confident are you that your vote will be accurately counted in the upcoming election?"