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RESEARCH

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

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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.

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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.

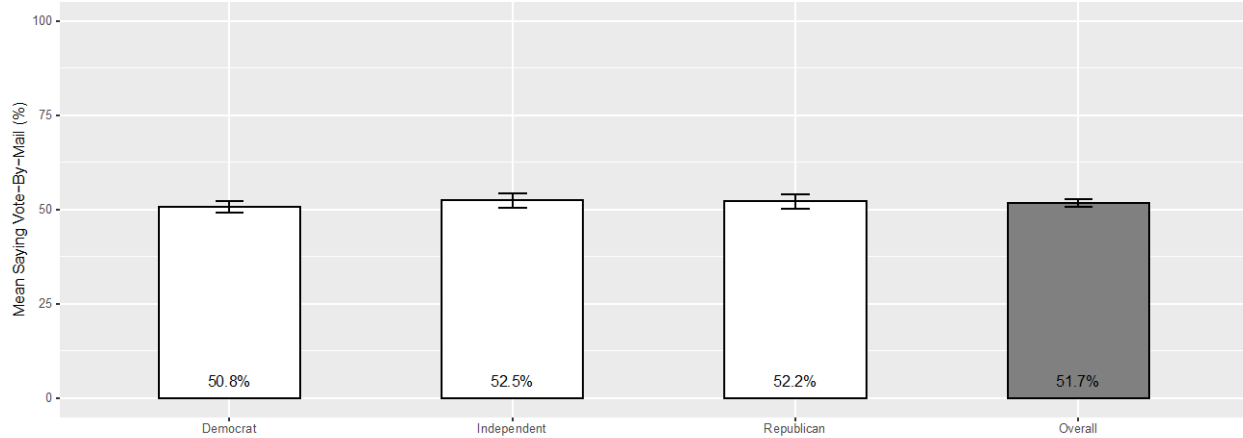
Overall, 51.7% of respondents said that they would prefer to vote by mailing in their ballot. Another 18.9% selected the option of dropping off a ballot that had been automatically mailed to them a month before election day. Combining these two numbers, a total of 70.6% of voters overall preferred to 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.

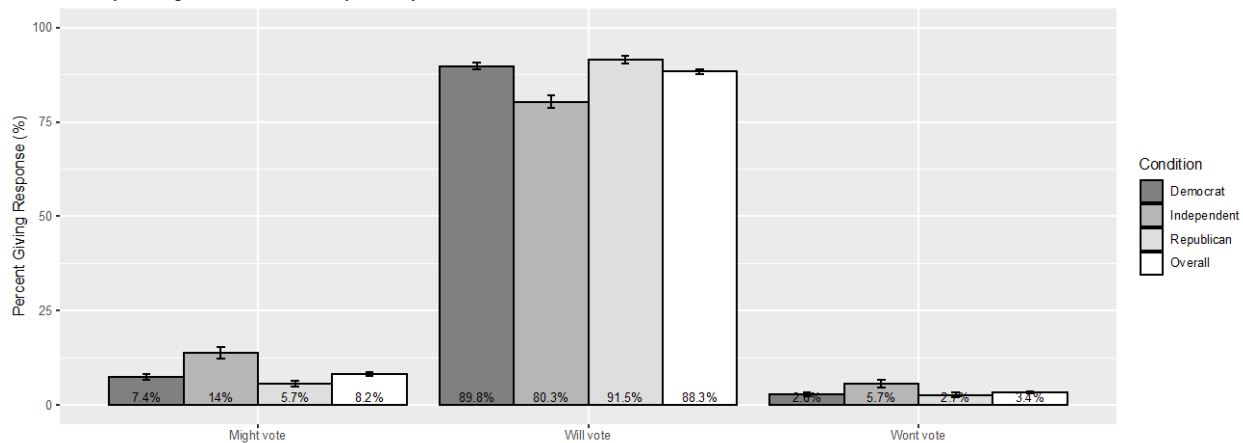
Would a policy that shifts away from in-person voting options toward voting by mail translate into differential turnout rates across partisan groups? To explore this question, we also asked respondents whether they were likely to participate in November if casting a mail ballot was their only option. 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.



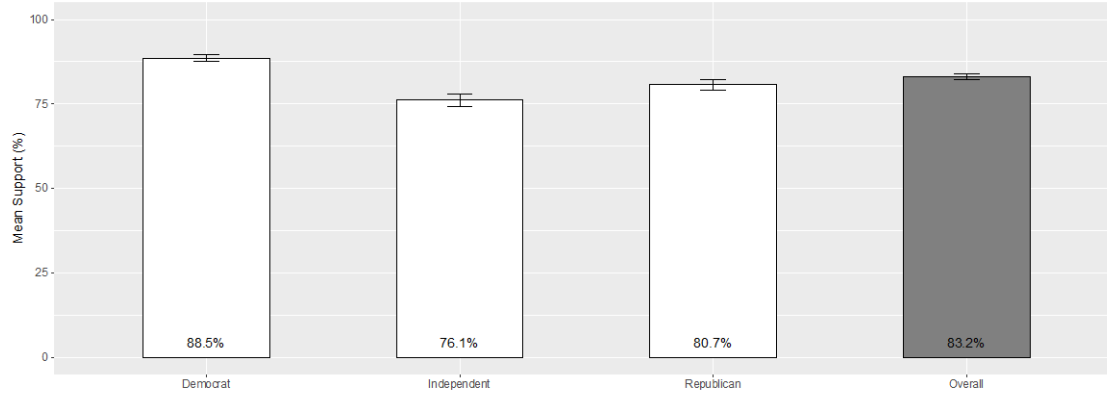
III. Is There a Partisan Divide Over the Election Policies that Californians Support?

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.

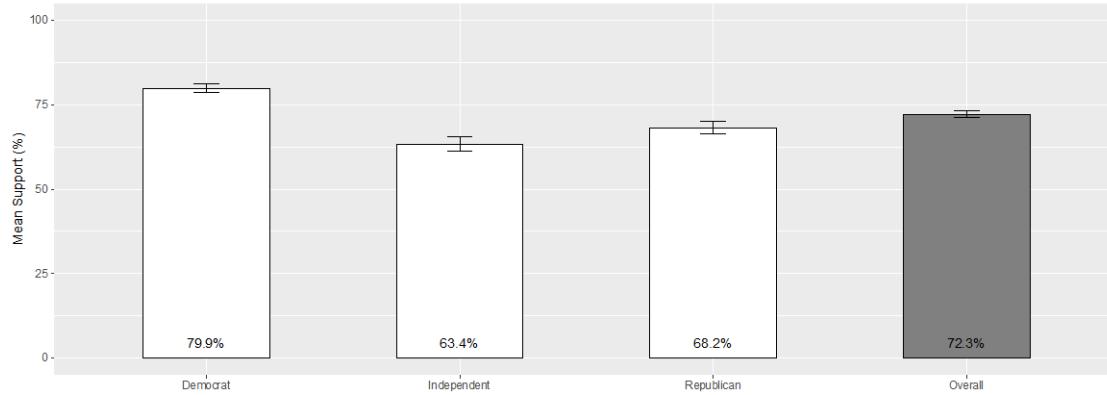


Figure 2. Policy Views on Voting by Mail, by party

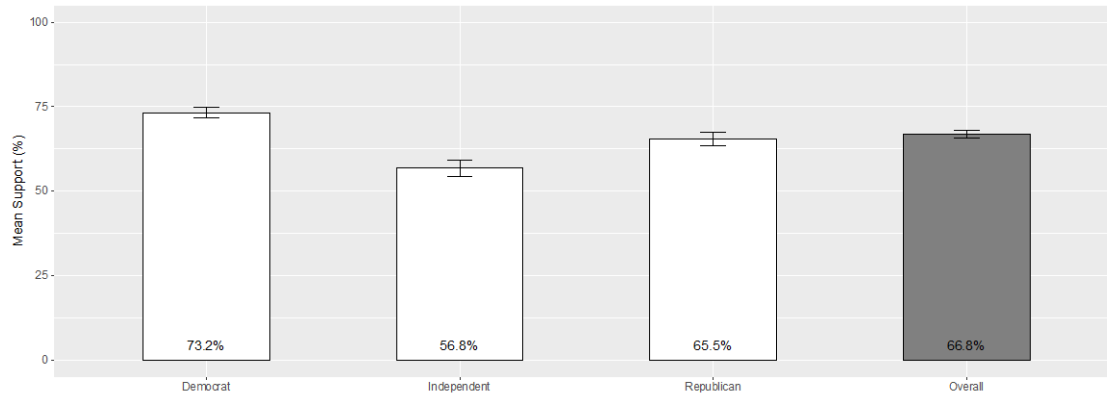
For the upcoming November 3 election, would you support national legislation directing all states to send a vote by mail ballot to any voter who requests one?



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.



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