

UC San Diego

UC San Diego Previously Published Works

Title

Working Paper: How do Americans Want Elections to be Run During the COVID-19 Crisis?

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6mb7764n>

Authors

Kousser, Thaddeus

HILL, Seth

Lockhart, Mackenzie

et al.

Publication Date

2023-12-13

Peer reviewed

How do Americans Want Elections to be Run During the COVID-19 Crisis?

Thad Kousser, Seth Hill, and Mackenzie Lockhart (UC San Diego),
Jennifer Merolla (UC Riverside), and Mindy Romero (USC)

Abstract. To inform the vital conversation among the nation's political leaders, elections administrators, and scholars about how to hold a safe, accessible, and fair election in November, this paper reports how a sample of 5,612 eligible American voters, surveyed April 8-10, want to see the election run during the COVID-19 crisis. We embed a randomized experiment presenting respondents with truthful summaries of the projections of two teams of scientists about the pandemic. Our descriptive findings show that four in ten eligible voters would prefer to cast their ballot by mail rather than in person this November and that a majority of respondents favor policies expanding mail voting. Our experimental findings show that respondents who read the scientific projections were more likely to prefer voting by mail, were more likely to trust that a mail ballot would be counted accurately, and were more likely to favor holding the election entirely by mail.

Acknowledgments: We are grateful for the helpful guidance provided by Rick Hasen, J. Morgan Kousser, Paul Gronke, and Bonnie N. Kaiser, and to the University of California Office of the President's Multicampus Research Program for providing funding for the New Electorate Project, Grant ID MRP-17-454899.

With the COVID-19 pandemic dramatically disrupting everyday life in the United States, state and local elections officials are seeking to adapt the way that they administer elections to ensure the safety of voters and their workers, while still securing access to the ballot and the integrity of elections. Sixteen states have delayed their presidential primary elections because of the public health crisis, while US Senators Amy Klobuchar and Ron Wyden have introduced legislation to expand voting by mail and adopt other new procedures in November's presidential contest.¹ Leading election law scholars have advanced proposals to expand voting by mail (Hasen 2020) and political science experts on election administration have provided guidance (Persily and Stewart 2020). Courts across the nation, including the US Supreme Court, have been asked to rule on cases addressing voting changes in response to COVID-19,² and President Trump himself has weighed in on the topic, asserting that "Mail ballots are very dangerous for this country because of cheaters."³

Important to informing this vital public debate is the voice of America's voters themselves. In this paper, we present the results of a survey that we fielded on April 8-10 asking a sample of 5,612 eligible American voters for their views on to how run November's elections. We asked a series of questions designed to determine how voters would like to cast their own ballots in the November 2020 election, their confidence in how accurately their own ballots and the ballots of

¹ See Nick Corasaniti and Stephanie Saul, "16 States Have Postponed their Primaries Because of Coronavirus. Here's a List," *New York Times*, April 17, 2020, accessed at <https://www.nytimes.com/article/2020-campaign-primary-calendar-coronavirus.html> and Maggie Miller, "Democrats Introduce Bill to Promote Mail-In Voting Amid Coronavirus Crisis," *The Hill*, March 18, 2020, accessed at <https://thehill.com/policy/technology/488334-democratic-senators-introduce-bill-to-promote-mail-in-voting-during>

² See Austin Sarat, "Why the Supreme Court Made Wisconsin Vote During the Coronavirus Crisis," *The Conversation*, April 14, 2020, accessed at <https://theconversation.com/why-the-supreme-court-made-wisconsin-vote-during-the-coronavirus-crisis-136102>

³ See Stephanie Saul and Reed J. Epstein, "Trump is Pushing a False Argument on Vote-by-Mail Fraud. Here are the Facts," April 11, 2020, *New York Times*, accessed at <https://www.nytimes.com/article/mail-in-voting-explained.html?searchResultPosition=2>

others will be counted if cast through different modes of voting, and their preferences about potential changes in federal policy and funding levels. We report the results of this original survey below and make the data available for replication (*identifying Dataverse link*).

Because the extent of the COVID-19 crisis and how it will unfold over the coming months is uncertain to eligible voters in April 2020, just as it is to the policymakers and elections officials who must plan for a November election this year, we embed a randomized experiment in this survey presenting different future scenarios. We present two treatment groups of respondents with truthful summaries of the projections of two widely-cited teams of scientists, with one team projecting a peak of the public health crisis in the spring of 2020 and the other projecting that its impact will peak in the fall if social distancing measures are relaxed at that time. A control group receives no projections.

This design allows us to address two research questions. The first is descriptive: How would eligible American voters like to see the November 2020 election run – with predominantly in-person voting options, through the mail, or with multiple voting options allowed? Our second question leverages the randomized experiment to make casual inferences about whether eligible voters are influenced by the projections of experts, adapting their personal preferences and policy positions based on predictions about when the COVID-19 crisis will peak. Our hypotheses, which we filed in a pre-analysis plan at the EGAP Registry, predict that exposure to the scientific projections will affect how voters view the election: we expect that both treatments will make respondents more likely to prefer to vote by mail themselves and to support policies that allow this option. We expect to observe the strongest effects for the treatment projecting a fall peak in the crisis.

One aim of this research design is to provide policymakers with conditional guidance, presenting data on how voters want to cast their own ballots and to see election

rules change if different scenarios come to fruition. As health experts learn more about the likely timing of the peak impact of COVID-19, elections officials may have to adjust their planning. Our findings under the two treatments can present guidance about how the public views voting under either a spring or a fall peak in the impact of the crisis.

The findings will also speak to the political science literatures about voting by mail, voting under personal risk, and whether voters are relatively myopic or forward thinking. A well-developed literature on mail ballot voting has used observational methods (Oliver 1996; Karp and Banducci 2000, 2001, Berinsky, Burns, and Traugott 2001, Gerber, Huber, and Hill 2013, see Gronke et al. 2008 for a review), natural experiments (Kousser and Mullin 2007), and field experimental methods (Arceneaux et al. 2012) to study which types of voters prefer to cast mail ballots and how shifts to this mode of voting impact political participation. A recent working paper explores its effects on the partisan composition of the electorate, yielding null findings (Thompson et al. 2020). Our study can contribute to the literature studying voting by mail in the past by assessing how voters view this option in 2020, when a major public health crisis poses new risks for voting in person.

Because our experimental design focuses respondents' attention on this crisis, it allows us to observe whether their voting intentions are influenced by potential risks. Is the expressed desire to cast a ballot in a particular manner responsive to estimates of the risk that in-person voting at that time may pose, or are plans to exercise the franchise relatively inelastic? While the risks are of a different nature and scale, voting during a pandemic can be conceptually connected to studies of voting and violence in India (Wilkinson 2004) and Afghanistan (Weidmann and Callen 2013) and to the broader literature on elections held under violent conditions (Ellman and Wantchekon 2000). And because our two treatments vary the timing of the health risk, any differential effects brought by the "spring peak" and "fall peak" treatments can speak to the literature on how forward-thinking

voters are. Healy and Malhotra (2009) show that voters are myopic when it comes to natural disasters, rewarding politicians only for responding after disasters rather than for preparing for them. Among the eligible voters whom we survey, are voting intentions about an election taking place more than six months in the future responsive to different predicted scenarios, or is the American electorate at this time looking toward November's elections solely through the lens of present conditions? The estimated effects of our experimental treatments will shed light on these questions.

In this paper, we begin by providing the details of our survey and our experimental treatment, and then outline our expectations about how responses may change under our experimental treatments. (We explore differences across demographic and partisan groups in other planned analyses of these data.) We then present the overall views of our respondents along with the responses for our control and treatment groups to three sets of questions: How do eligible voters prefer to cast their own ballots – by mailing in their ballot, or by casting it at a polling place on Election Day or at an early voting center? – and whether they would be comfortable waiting in line at a polling place or willing to work as a poll worker, both with and without social distancing measures in place? Which mode of voting gives eligible voters the greatest confidence that ballots will be counted accurately, both for their own votes and the votes of others? What federal policy and funding changes do voters support, including policies that would allow any registered voter to request a mail ballot, require elections officials to send a mail ballot to every registrant, or proposals to shift elections entirely to mail ballot voting?

Survey Methodology

We fielded a survey from April 8-10, 2020 asking a nationally diverse sample of 5,612 eligible American voters for their views on the upcoming November election, along with other questions on their political and policy views asked after our battery of elections questions. We list the full text of our elections questions and answers in our online appendix. We recruited our sample through the

online platform Lucid Fulcrum Exchange, with all respondents completing their surveys online through a Qualtrics instrument designed by the authors. Recent work by Coppock and McClellan (2019, 1) demonstrates that “demographic and experimental findings on Lucid track well with US national benchmarks.” Our survey instrument and methodology was reviewed and certified as exempt from IRB review by the ----- Human Research Protections Program before fielding.

Our sample frame is the citizen voting age population of the United States, based on the characteristics of that frame reported in the 2018 American Community Survey. So that our sample of respondents would reflect this larger populations, we sampled to meet targets of respondents matching the distributions of key demographic characteristics of voting age citizens: gender, age, education levels, race, ethnicity, and region. We created survey weights based on those targets, using gender on its own, the joint distribution of age by education,⁴ and the joint distribution of race by ethnicity.⁵ All of our reported results are based on these weights.

In order to ensure that our sample contained a sufficiently large number of respondents in minority racial and ethnicity groups in order to conduct future analyses of the potential for disparate impact of voting regulations, we drew a large sample of 5,612 eligible voters nationwide. Even without using weights, our pool of respondents is quite diverse: 70.7% are white, 11.9% are Black, 10.6% are Hispanic, 5.6% are Asian, and 1.2% reported being of another race. Each of these figures is within two percentage points of the estimates for the nation’s citizen age voting population reported in United States Census Bureau (2020). The respondents were also a politically diverse group of eligible voters: asked to recall the 2016 presidential election, 30.1% reported that they did not cast a ballot, and of those who did, 47.8% reported voting for Hillary Clinton, 47.5% reported

⁴ Our bins 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.

⁵ Our bins for race are White, Black, Asian, and Other, and our bins for ethnicity are Hispanic or Not Hispanic.

voting for Donald Trump, and 4.7% supported another candidate. Looking ahead to the November 2020 election, 81.6% of respondents reported that they either “Definitely” (68.4%) or “Probably” (13.2%) intended to vote.

Expectations for Experimental Effects

This paper reports, first, overall preferences for our battery of questions about the 2020 elections, showing how a sample of America’s eligible electorate viewed them in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis. Then we separately report mean responses for three equally-sized groups exposed to different information about the outbreak. We provided the control group with no information about it, while we provided each treatment group with truthful summaries of the projections of one of two widely-cited teams of scientists, one at the University of Washington and the other at Imperial College London. One of the teams projects a peak of the public health crisis in the spring of 2020 (the “spring peak” treatment), while the other projects that its impact will peak in the fall if social distancing measures are relaxed at that time. (the “fall peak” treatment). Before answering questions about their preferences on voting, respondents in our survey were randomized into one of the three conditions below:⁶

1. The **spring peak** treatment: “While no one can be certain how the COVID-19 outbreak will progress in the United States, one well-respected team of scientists at a leading university has projected that if social distancing measures are widely adopted, the effects of the virus will reach their peak in April, then gradually decline throughout the spring and into the summer.”
2. The **fall peak** treatment: “While no one can be certain how the COVID-19 outbreak will progress in the United States, one well-respected team of scientists at a leading university has projected that if social distancing measures are widely adopted now but are

⁶ In debriefing materials, we provided respondents who received one of the treatments with a direct link to the study that was summarized for their group, and provided all respondents with direct links to both of the studies containing these projections.

lifted during the early fall, a new surge in cases will come and the effects of the virus will reach their peak in November or December.”

3. A control group that was not presented with any predictions

Because respondents were randomized into the three groups, we can attribute any observed differences in their subsequent answers to the information provided in the treatments. As in a typical survey experiment, we rely on randomization to isolate the causal effect of our treatment (Sniderman 1996). In our appendix, we report the results of a balance check that confirms that our three groups were distributed similarly across conditions on a host of demographic characteristics. The appendix also includes a manipulation check showing that most respondents generally acquired the information about the projected timing of the peak. Unlike most survey experiments, because we are interested in both the treatment effect and the overall distribution of responses, we report all results using the survey weights.

Based on our pre-analysis plan registered at the EGAP Registry (<http://egap.org/content/registration>), we hypothesize that exposure to either of the treatments providing information about the COVID-19 crisis will affect respondents, making them more likely to prefer to cast a mail ballot themselves and to support policies that would allow this option for others. Our postulated mechanism here is that any information that brings public health concerns to the top of respondents’ minds will cue them to think about stay-at-home and social distancing directives (Zaller 1992). When threats related to issues such as public health are salient, individuals will be more inclined to support policies that provide protection (Albertson and Gadarian 2015; Kam and Estes 2016). This should make individuals more likely to prefer a safer option of voting at home rather than in person, unless social distancing can be achieved in a polling place.⁷

⁷ It is important to note that administering a survey the prompts respondents to think about COVID-19 in the midst of this public health crisis is generally unlikely to yield strong treatment effects: in April 2020, the pandemic is likely to be on the top of the minds of all respondents, regardless of what they read in a survey. All respondents are “pre-treated”

Second, we expect to see the strongest experimental effects for the projected “fall peak” treatment, which will cue voters to pay particularly close attention to the potential safety concerns of in-person voting options in November. Under conditions of heightened anxiety, as is the case with COVID-19,⁸ individuals should be more likely to pay attention to information, process that information carefully, and use that information in the formation of policy preferences and in their behavior (e.g., Albertson and Gadarian 2015; Huddy, Feldman and Cassese 2007; Valentino et al. 2008). They should therefore be more inclined to prefer voting by mail when they are paying attention to a peak of the fall instead of a peak in the spring. These differential treatment effects may not be strong; indeed, Healy and Malhotra’s (2009) work on voter myopia might suggest that they would be null, with voters viewing elections through a current lens. Still, our firm prior, registered in our pre-analysis plan, is that scientific projections that highlight the potential that COVID-19 could still be a major public health threat in November, when the general election takes place, will prompt respondents to be more supportive of mail ballot options at that time.

Finally, we expect that all of these treatment effects will carry through from personal preferences to policy preferences, as eligible voters first contemplate how they would like to cast a ballot and then view policy proposals in light of their personal choice. While findings in the literature are mixed on whether people connect their self-interest with policy preferences (for a discussion Lau and Heldman 2009), scholarship suggests they are more likely to do so when the stakes are clear (Chong, Citrin and Conley 2001), when the issue is highly salient in the environment (Lau and Heldman 2009), and when policies are transparent, presented in a clear way and are easy to

(see Druckman and Leeper 2012). The treatment effects that we report below, then, are likely to be conservative estimates of the more general impact of raising potential public health threats when asking questions about elections.

⁸ See Bethany Albertson and Shana Kushner Gadarian, “This is Who Americans Trust about Coronavirus Information,” *Washington Post*, March 20, 2020, accessed at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/03/20/were-all-anxious-about-pandemic-who-do-americans-want-hear/>

understand (Chong, Citrin and Conley 2001). The stakes are certainly high in the case of COVID-19, and policies around supporting vote by mail are fairly clear and easy to understand. To test these hypotheses, we will focus in the data analysis below on the proportion of respondents favoring voting by mail, comparing the two treatment and control groups.

Hypothesis 1. Exposure to either treatment providing projections about the COVID-19 crisis will make respondents more likely to favor mail ballot voting and the policies that promote it.

Hypothesis 2. Exposure to the treatment projecting that the COVID-19 crisis could peak in the fall will make respondents especially likely to favor mail ballot voting and the policies that promote it.

Results

A. Personal Preferences for Casting Ballots

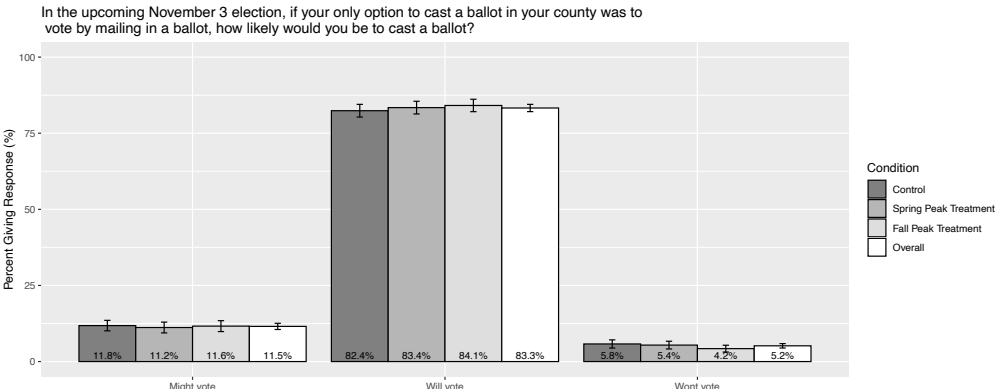
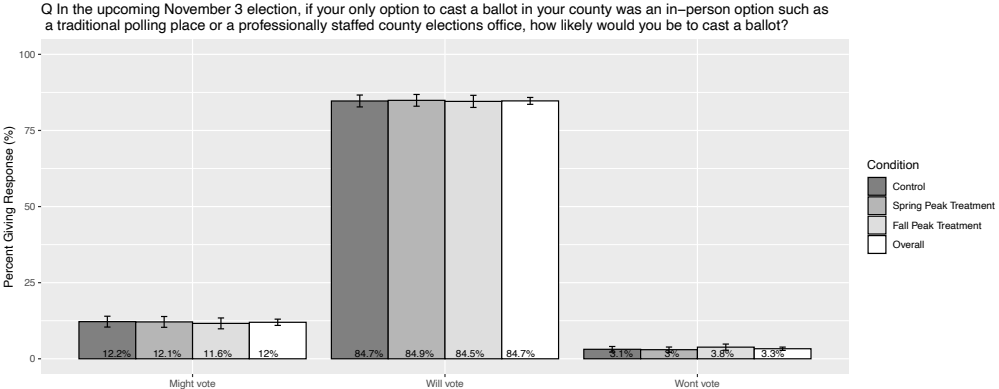
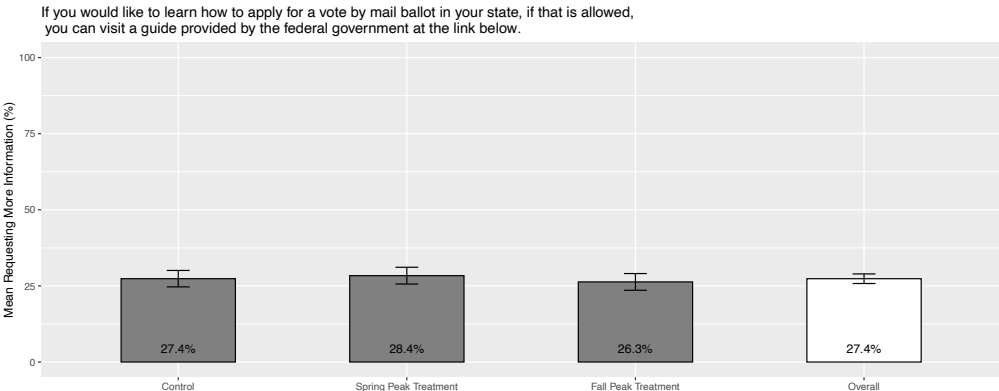
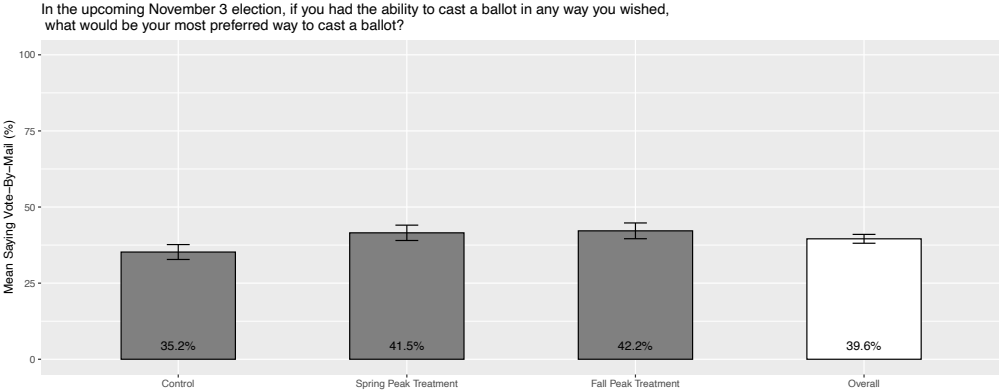
Figure 1 presents our first set of results. As with all of our figures, it lists the full survey text of each question in the top left corner of each graph, then reports the mean percentage of respondents in the control and two treatment groups who selected a given answer in gray columns and the overall percentage in the white column. We report our point estimates of these percentages at the base of each column with error bars representing 95% confidence intervals around these estimates (these are roughly analogous to the margin of error of the survey, and for a question in which respondents split evenly between two answers, this margin would be + or – 2.3 percentage points for the treatment groups and + or – 1.3 points for respondents overall).

On the key question of how respondents would most prefer to cast their ballot, we find that 39.6% of respondents overall chose mailing in a ballot sent to them a month before Election Day, rather than voting at a traditional polling place or at a professionally-staffed early voting center. This expressed preference differs from the past actions of voters in our sample. Before providing any of the groups with an experimental treatment, we asked respondents whether they knew their polling place location or whether they vote by mail. Only 12.8% responded indicated that they typically “vote by mail or not at a polling place.”

Turning to our causal analysis, the proportion of respondents who most preferred to cast a ballot by mail was significantly higher for those who read either of the scientific projections about the COVID-19 outbreak, consistent with our Hypothesis 1. While 35.2% of respondents in the control condition selected voting by mail as their most preferred way to cast a ballot, 41.5% of those providing the “spring peak” prompt and 42.2% of those reading the “fall peak” projection chose this option, with both treatments having effects that were statistically significant at above the 95% confidence level compared to the control group. These undifferentiated treatment effects provide support for Hypothesis 1 but not for Hypothesis 2, which expected that the “fall peak” treatment would exert the strongest effects here. We did not observe any treatment effects when we invited respondents, at the conclusion of the survey, to visit a federal website providing information about how to apply for a mail ballot in their state. Overall, 27.4% of respondents selected this option. We also observed no treatment effect when we asked respondents whether they were likely to cast a ballot in November if voting in person was their only option (and, subsequently, if voting by mail was their only option). For both questions, 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. As the final two graphs in Figure 1 show, overall 3.3% responded that they would not vote if an in-person option was their way to cast a ballot, while 5.2% reported that they would not vote if a mail ballot was their only option.

In summary, respondents who read projections about the COVID-19 outbreak shifted significantly toward preferring to vote by mail, but this information did not affect their likelihood of visiting a website about this option or alter their intent to participate in November. This stated commitment to voting, even under a public health crisis, is consistent with existing work that demonstrates a strong social norm that citizens should vote in elections. We can see this in public opinion surveys, where social-desirability bias leads individuals to inflate their reports of voting even

Figure 1. Personal Preferences for Casting a Ballot in November 2020

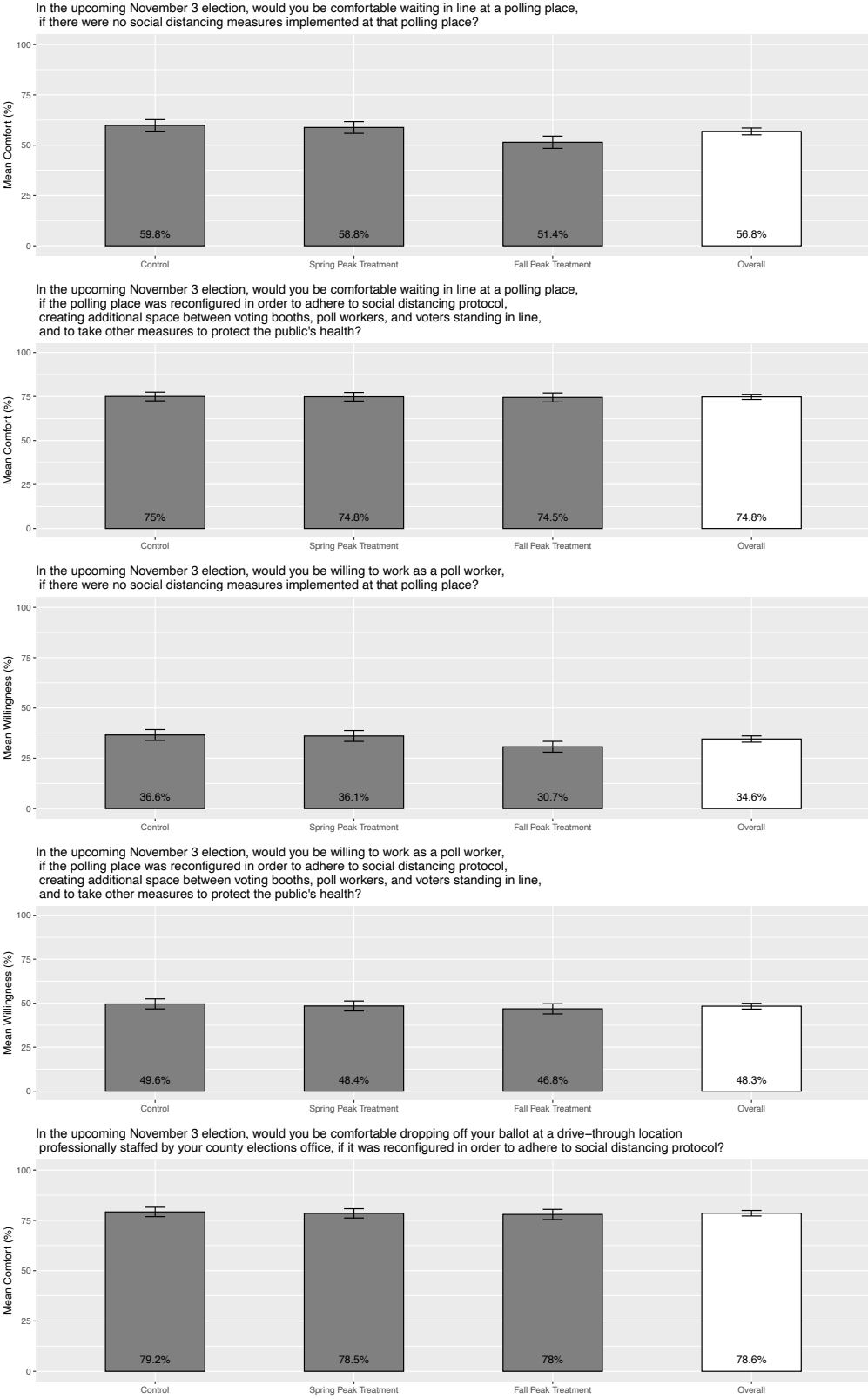


if they did not cast a ballot (e.g., Ansolabehere and Hersh 2012; Enamorado and Imai 2019; Jackman and Spahn 2019; Silver, Anderson, and Abramson 1986). We also see this in get out the vote (GOTV) studies which show that exerting social pressure messages in mailers is much more effective in increasing turnout than mailers that do not exert social pressure around the social norm of voting (e.g., Abrajano and Panagopoulous 2011; Gerber, Green and Larimer 2008; Gerber et al. 2016; Mann 2010; for a review see Green and Gerber 2019).

We also asked voters about their comfort levels with waiting in line at a polling place or working as a poll worker, either with or without social distancing measures implemented at the polling place. We asked both versions of these questions to the full sample, in sequence. As Figure 2 shows, when we asked about comfort levels at polling places that did not implement social distancing, we observe a substantively strong and statistically significant effect for the “fall peak” treatment, in the expected direction. Only 51.4% of respondents receiving that treatment said that they would be comfortable waiting in line at such a polling place, compared with 58.8% of respondents receiving the “spring peak” treatment and 59.8% of respondents in the control group. Similarly, respondents who read the fall peak projections were much less likely to be willing to work as a poll worker (30.7%) than respondents in the spring peak (36.1%) or control (36.6%) conditions. Both of these fall peak treatment effects were significant well above the 95% confidence level. These findings are consistent with our Hypothesis 2 but not with Hypothesis 1: when respondents anticipated their comfort in November with waiting in line or working at polling places without strict social distancing measures in place, only the “fall peak” predictions influenced them.

When we asked these questions again, but specified that polling places would follow a number of specific social distancing measures recommended by the NAACP (see <https://naacp.org/coronavirus/voter-access-and-participation-during-coronavirus-pandemic/>), respondents in all groups expressed higher levels of comfort and no differences across treatment

Figure 2. Personal Comfort with Different Ways of Casting a Ballot in November 2020

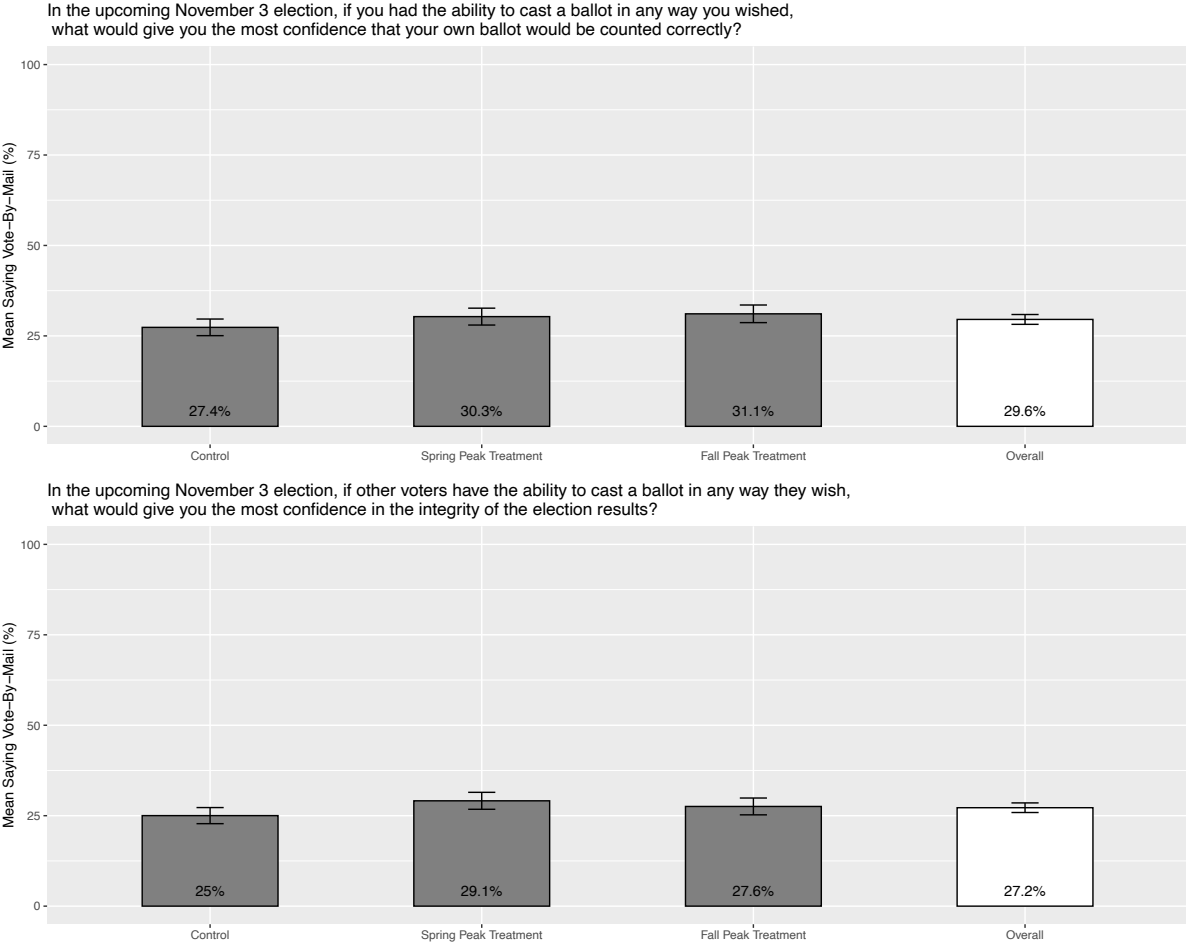


groups emerged. Overall, 74.8% of respondents would be comfortable waiting in line at a polling place that implemented extensive social distancing measures and 48.3% would be willing to work at such a poll. Finally, 78.6% of respondents would be comfortable dropping off their ballot at professionally-staffed drive through locations, with no treatment differences observed.

B. Confidence that Ballots will be Counted Correctly

The two questions reported in Figure 3 ask respondents how confident they are that their own ballot will be counted correctly if it is cast either by mail, at a polling place, or at a

Figure 3. Confidence that Ballots Cast Through Different Modes Will be Counted Correctly



professionally-staffed early vote center. Overall, respondents are less likely to respond that voting by mail gives them more confidence than the other two ways to cast a ballot: 29.6% select voting by mail for their own ballot, and 27.2% are most confident in the integrity of results if other voters cast ballots by mail. Turning to our causal analysis, both of our treatments increase the likelihood that respondents identify mail ballots as the mode that they have the most confidence in, for both of these questions. These significant treatment effects are consistent with our Hypothesis 1. This likely reflects a psychological process where individuals reason backwards from policy preferences to justifications (Kunda 1990; Sniderman, Brody and Tetlock 1991).

C. Policy views

Finally, in Figure 4 we report how respondents viewed some of the major policy proposals that have been advanced at the national and state level 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, which is a central aspect of legislation introduced on March 18, 2020 by US Senators Amy Klobuchar and Ron Wyden, and it is also among the proposals advanced by the Brennan Center.⁹ Overall, 74.7% of respondents who took a position supported this approach. (In our policy questions, we calculate proportions based on “Yes” and “No” responses, removing “Unsure” responses). The next question summarized a proposal that moves one step further by sending a vote by mail ballot to every voter, even if they do not request one in advance. Overall, 63.9% of respondents support this option. On neither of these questions did we observe any significant treatment effects.

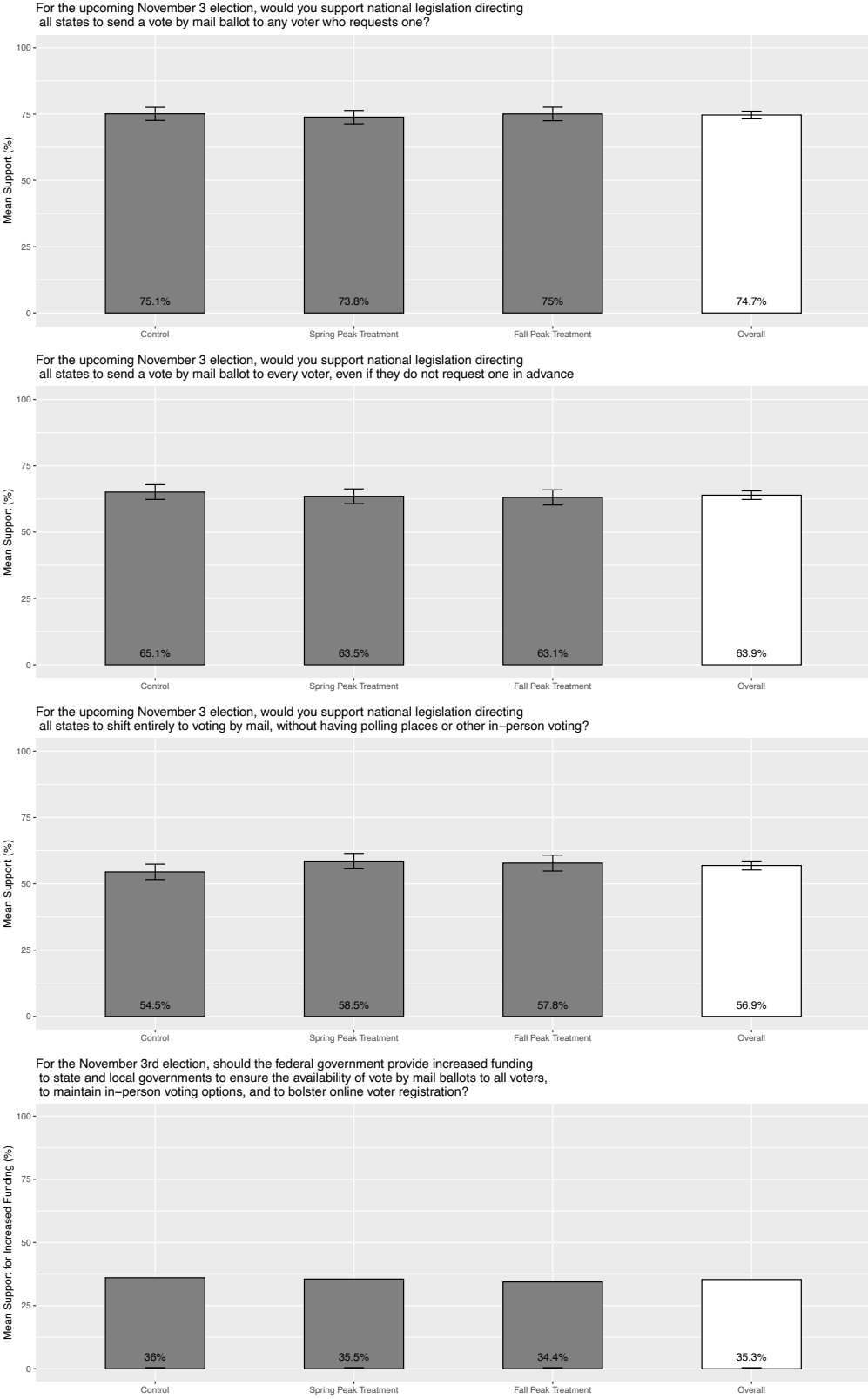
⁹ See “How to Protect the 2020 Vote from the Coronavirus,” Brennan Center for Justice, March 16, 2020, accessed at <https://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/Coronavirus%20Response%20Memo.pdf>

When we asked respondents about the most controversial proposal – national legislation directing all states to shift entirely to voting by mail – we did observe strong treatment effects consistent with Hypothesis 1. Respondents exposed to either of the COVID-19 projections were significantly more likely than those in the control condition to support this shift toward mandatory voting by mail. Support for this proposal registered at 54.5% for respondents who received no prompt about the outbreak, 58.5% for those in the “spring peak” treatment, and 57.8% for respondents in the “fall peak” treatment.

Our last question asked about support for increased federal funding to support vote by mail systems in state and local governments. We informed respondents that “The Brennan Center has estimated that the cost of supporting all of these measures would be \$2 billion. The recent COVID-19 Stimulus Bill passed by Congress provides \$400 million in grants to states.” We asked if they favored “Additional funding to increase total federal support for the 2020 elections to \$2 billion,” keeping funding at its current level of \$400 million or reducing it. There were no observed treatment effects, and overall, 35.3% of respondents favored increasing funding.

In our online Appendix, Figure A1 presents additional analysis of further questions about how to implement voting by mail and online voter registration. For those four questions, we observed no treatment effects.

Figure 4. Policy Views on Expanding Voting by Mail in the November 2020 Election



Conclusions

This paper reports on how a sample that reflects the demographic characteristics of eligible American voters views the November 2020 elections. We present descriptive findings showing that four in ten eligible voters would prefer to cast their ballot by mail rather than in person this November and that a majority of respondents favor policies that would expand vote by mail options. Our experimental findings show that respondents who read the COVID-19 projections were more likely to prefer voting by mail, to express discomfort with waiting in line or working at a polling place that did not practice social distancing, more likely to trust that a mail ballot would be counted accurately, and more likely to support a proposal to hold the 2020 election by mail.

Our goal is not to interpret these findings or advocate specific policy implications; rather, we seek to provide data to inform the vital national conversation about how to plan for elections under COVID-19. It is important to note that whether the expressed preferences for a voting method result in actual partisan differences in voting behavior will be revealed in November, 2020. Our experimental approach can allow elections officials to see how voters' preferences and perspectives may change depending on two potential scenarios for the future path of infections. The confidence that our sample of eligible voters expresses about their ballots being counted correctly, along with their views on policies now being proposed, can inform policymakers at the national, state, and local levels as well as election reform advocates. The strong and significant treatment effects that we observe in our experiment can also answer broader political science questions about how everyday Americans address physical risk when it comes to their exercise of democracy. To address the potentially disparate impacts of COVID-19 risks on different groups in our nation, there is a need for further study of divergent trends in how demographic and partisan groups answer these questions and respond to the experiment. We are now conducting these analyses, and invite others to do so with our data, to provide a factual basis for a critical national discussion.

References

- Abrajano, Marisa and Costas Panagopoulos. 2011. "Does Language Matter? The Impact of Spanish versus English-Language GOTV Efforts on Latino Turnout." *American Politics Research* 39: 643-663.
- Albertson, Bethany and Shana Kushner Gadarian. 2015. *Anxious Politics: Democratic Citizenship in a Threatening World*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Ansolahehere, Stephen, and Eitan Hersh. 2012. "Validation: What Big Data Reveal about Survey Misreporting and the Real Electorate." *Political Analysis* 20: 437-459.
- Arceneaux, Kevin, Megan Mullin, and Thad Kousser. 2012. "Get Out the Vote By Mail: A Randomized Experiment Testing the Effects of Mobilization in Traditional and Vote-by-Mail Precincts." *Political Research Quarterly*. 65(4):882-894.
- Berinsky, Adam J., Nancy Burns, and Michael W. Traugott. 2001. "Who Votes by Mail? A Dynamic Model of the Individual-level Consequences of Voting-by-Mail Systems." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 65:178-97.
- Chong, Dennis, Jack Citrin, and Patricia Conley. 2001. "When Self-Interest Matters." *Political Psychology* 22(3): 541-570.
- Coppock, Alexander and Oliver A. McClellan. 2019. "Validating the Demographic, Political, Psychological, and Experimental Results Obtained from a New Source of Online Survey Respondents." *Research & Politics*. 6(1) DOI: 2053168018822174
- Druckman, James N. and Thomas J. Leeper. 2012. "Learning More from Political Communication Experiments: Pretreatment and Its Effects." *American Journal of Political Science* 56(4): 875-896.
- Ellman, Matthew and Leonard Wantchekon. 2000. "Electoral Competition under the Threat of Political Unrest." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 115:499-531.
- Enamorado, Ted and Kosuke Imai. 2019. "Validating Self-Reported Turnout by Linking Public Opinion Surveys with Administrative Records." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 83(4): 723-748.
- Gerber, Alan S., Donald P. Green, and Christopher W. Larimer. 2008. "Social Pressure and Voter Turnout: Evidence from a Large-Scale Field Experiment." *American Political Science Review* 102: 33-48.
- Gerber, Alan. 2016. "Why People Vote: Estimating the Social Returns to Voting." *British Journal of Political Science* 46(2): 241-264.
- Green, Donald P. and Alan S. Gerber. 2019. *Get out the Vote, 4th Edition*. Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.
- Gronke, Paul, Eva Galanes-Rosenbaum, Peter A Miller, and Daniel Toffey. 2008. "Convenience Voting." *Annual Review of Political Science* 11: 437-455.
- Hasen, Richard L. 2020 "Trump is Wrong About the Dangers of Absentee Ballots," Washington Post, April 9, 2020, accessed at

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/04/09/trump-is-wrong-about-dangers-absentee-ballots/>

- Healy, Andrew, and Neil Malhotra, 2009. "Myopic Voters and Natural Disaster Policy." *American Political Science Review* 103(3): 387-406.
- Huddy, Leonie, Stanley Feldman, and Erin Cassese. 2007. "On the Distinct Political Effects of Anxiety and Anger." In Neuman, W. Russell, George E. Marcus, Ann Crigler, and Michael MacKuen, Eds. *The Affect Effect: Dynamics of Emotion in Political Thinking and Behavior*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Jackman, Simon, and Bradley Spahn. 2019. "Why Does the American National Election Study Overestimate Voter Turnout?" *Political Analysis* 27: 193-207.
- Kam, Cindy D. and Beth A. Estes. 2016. "Disgust Sensitivity and Public Demand for
- Karp, Jeffrey A., and Susan A. Banducci. 2001. "Absentee Voting, Mobilization, and Participation." *American Politics Research* 29:183-95.
- Karp, Jeffrey A., and Susan A. Banducci. 2000. "Going Postal: How All-mail Elections Influence Turnout." *Political Behavior* 22:223-39.
- Kousser, Thad, and Megan Mullin. 2007. "Does Voting by Mail Increase Participation? Using Matching to Analyze a Natural Experiment." *Political Analysis* 15(4): 428-445.
- Kunda, Ziva. 1990. "The Case for Motivated Reasoning." *Psychological Bulletin* 108(3):480- 498.
- Lau, Richard L. and Caroline Heldman. 2009. "Self-Interest, Public Attitudes, and Support for Public Policy." *Political Psychology* 30(4): 513-537.
- Mann, Christopher B. 2010. "Is There a Backlash to Social Pressure? A Large-Scale Field Experiment on Voter Mobilization." *Political Behavior* 32: 387-407.
- Oliver, J. Eric. 1996. "The Effects of Eligibility Restrictions and Party Activity on Absentee Voting and Overall Turnout." *American Journal of Political Science* 40:498-513.
- Persily, Nathaniel and Charles Stewart III, 2020, "Ten Recommendations to Assure a Healthy and Trustworthy 2020 Election," Lawfare.com, March 19, 2020, accessed at <https://www.lawfareblog.com/ten-recommendations-ensure-healthy-and-trustworthy-2020-election>.
- Protection." *The Journal of Politics* 78(2): 481-496.
- Silver, Brian D., Barbara A. Anderson, and Paul R. Abramson. 1986. "Who Overreports Voting?" *American Political Science Review* 80: 613-624.
- Sniderman, Paul, M., Richard A. Brody, and Phillip E. Tetlock. 1991. *Reasoning and Choice: Explorations in Political Psychology*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Sniderman, Paul. 1996. "Innovations in Experimental Design in Attitude Surveys." *Annual Review of Sociology* 22: 377-99.

- Thompson Daniel M., Jennifer Wu, Jesse Yoder, and Andrew B. Hall. 2020. "The Neutral Partisan Effects of Vote-by-Mail: Evidence from County-Level Roll-Outs." Stanford University Democracy and Polarization Lab Working Paper
- United States Census Bureau. 2020. "Citizen Voting Age Population by Race and Ethnicity." Accessed at <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/about/voting-rights/cvap.2018.html>
- Valentino, Nicholas A., Antoine J. Banks, Vincent L. Hutchings, and Anne K. Davis. 2008. "Is a Worried Citizen a Good Citizen? Emotions, Political Information Seek and Learning via the Internet." *Political Psychology* 29 (2): 247-273.
- Weidmann, Nils B. and Michael Callen. 2013. "Violence and Election Fraud: Evidence from Afghanistan." *British Journal of Political Science* 43:53-75.
- Wilkinson, Steven. 2004. *Votes and Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Zaller, John. 1992. *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. (New York: Cambridge University Press).

Online Appendix

The balance table below, Appendix Table A1., reports the demographic characteristics of the respondents randomized into our control group and two treatment groups. As it shows, respondents in each group were similar in their partisanship, education levels, race, and ethnicity. Two small differences emerge, and (in part because our sample size is so large) are statistically significant: respondents in our control group are less likely to be white, and more likely to be Hispanic, than respondents in either treatment group. In order to rule out the possibility that these differences account for any of our observed treatment effects, we estimated multivariate regression models for all of the survey questions reported in Tables 1-4 as dependent variables, with the two treatments and each racial and ethnic category entered separately as independent variables (with “American Indian or Alaska Native” as the reference category). Controlling for the race and ethnicity of respondents did not change any of our observed treatment effects: all of the significant treatment effects reported in our paper retained their statistical significance in these multivariate analyses.

Appendix Table A1. Experimental Balance Check

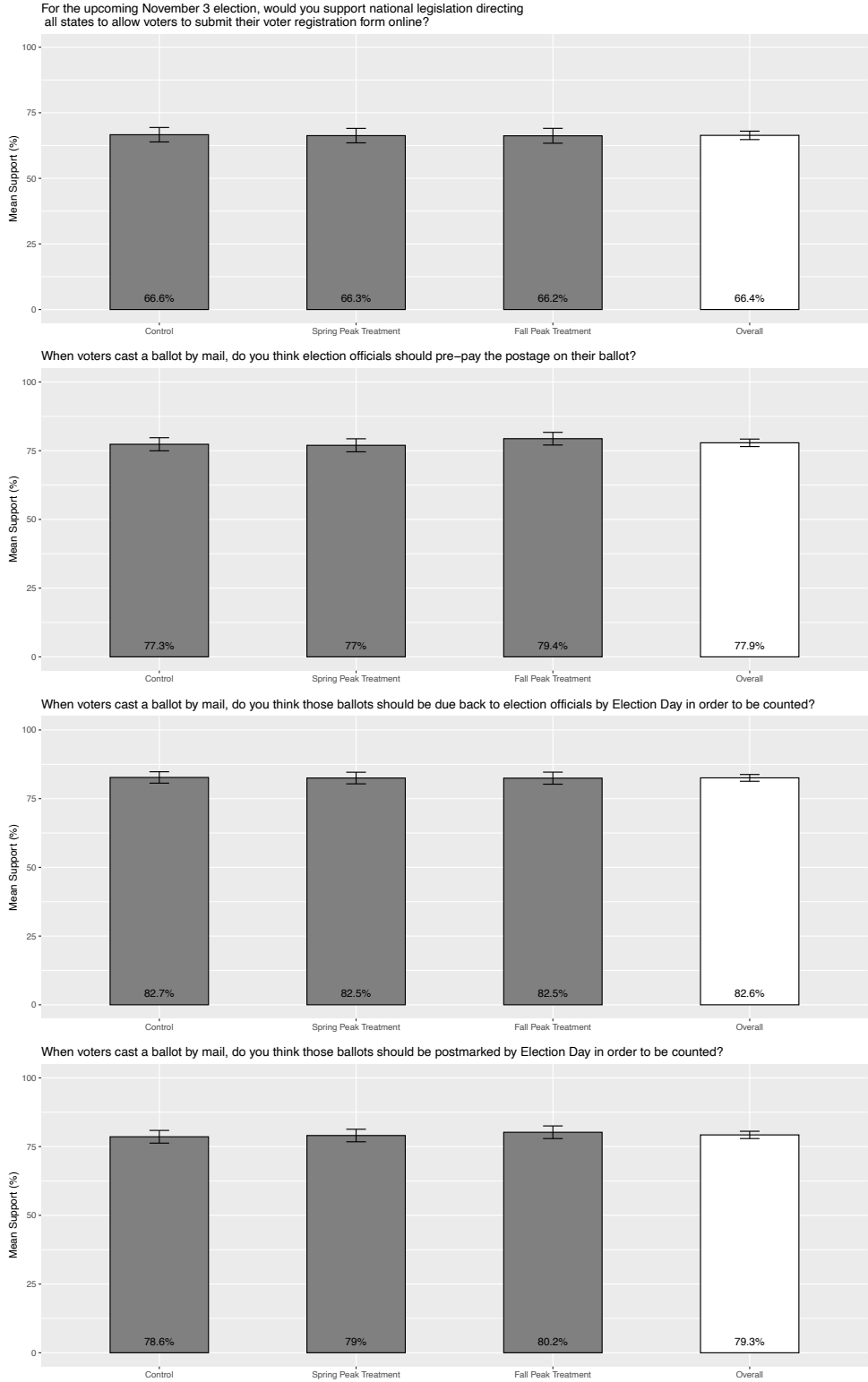
Variable	Control		Spring Treatment			Fall Treatment		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Test	Mean	SD	Test
Age	43.178	16.442	43.547	16.785	F=0.474	44.25	17.132	F=3.781
Proportion White	0.737	0.441	0.77	0.421	F=5.673*	0.778	0.416	F=8.597*
Proportion Male	0.373	0.484	0.377	0.485	F=0.067	0.387	0.487	F=0.744
Proportion Democrat	0.46	0.499	0.454	0.498	F=0.138	0.458	0.498	F=0.008
Proportion Republican	0.387	0.487	0.41	0.492	F=2.062	0.379	0.485	F=0.252
Proportion with College Degree	0.429	0.495	0.423	0.494	F=0.118	0.424	0.494	F=0.068
Proportion Hispanic	0.12	0.325	0.103	0.303	F=2.908	0.093	0.291	F=6.98**
Statistical significance markers: * p<0.05; ** p<0.01								

Appendix Table A2 reports the results of our experimental manipulation check. After providing our “spring peak” and “fall peak” prompts, we asked respondents a multiple choice question: “According to the team of scientists, when will the effects of the virus that causes COVID-19 reach their peak?” and provided three possible answers. The first column reports the distribution of answers provided by the “spring peak” treatment group, showing that 71% answered correctly and that only 7% expected a fall peak. For respondents in the “fall treatment” group, responses were not so accurate, perhaps indicating that most respondents came into this survey with strong prior expectations about a spring peak. Still, a November or December peak was the modal response category, selected by 48% of respondents in the treatment group, and only 32% expected a spring peak. The imperfect manipulation effects here perhaps explain why respondents generally responded to the two treatments in a similar manner, and make us even more confident in our findings when we observe divergent reactions to the two treatments that followed our hypothesized directions.

Appendix Table A2. Experimental Manipulation Check

Expected Peak	Spring Treatment	Fall Treatment
In April	1351	576
In July	419	354
In November or December	132	844

Figure A1. Additional Policy Views on Voting by Mail and other Remote Options



Voting Battery

Q1. 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?

(rotate answer order)

- By voting at a traditional polling place on Election Day
- By mailing in your ballot, after that ballot was sent to you a month before Election Day
- By voting at a professionally staffed county elections center, either on Election Day or in early voting in the week or so before Election Day

Q2. In the upcoming November 3 election, if you had the ability to cast a ballot in any way you wished, what would give you the **most confidence** that **your own** ballot would be counted correctly?

(rotate answer order)

- By voting at a traditional polling place on Election Day
- By mailing in your ballot, after that ballot was sent to you a month before Election Day
- By voting at a professionally staffed county elections center, either on Election Day or in early voting in the week or so before Election Day

Q3. In the upcoming November 3 election, if other voters have the ability to cast a ballot in any way they wish, what would give you the **most confidence in the integrity of the election results**?

(rotate answer order)

- Most voters cast a ballot at a traditional polling places on Election Day
- Most voters mail in their ballots, after that ballot was sent to them a month before Election Day
- Most voters cast a ballot at a professionally staffed county elections center, either on Election Day or in early voting in the week or so before Election Day

Q4. In the upcoming November 3 election, if your only option to cast a ballot in your county was an **in-person option** such as a traditional polling place or a professionally staffed county elections center, how likely would you be to cast a ballot?

1. Definitely will vote
2. Probably will vote
3. May or may not vote
4. Probably will not vote
5. Definitely will not vote

Q5. 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?

1. Definitely will vote
2. Probably will vote
3. May or may not vote
4. Probably will not vote
5. Definitely will not vote

Q6a. In the upcoming November 3 election, would you be **comfortable waiting in line** at a polling place, if there were no social distancing measures implemented at that polling place?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

Q7a. In the upcoming November 3 election, would you be willing to **work as a poll worker**, if there were no social distancing measures implemented at that polling place?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

Q6b. In the upcoming November 3 election, would you be **comfortable waiting in line** at a polling place, if the polling place was reconfigured in order to adhere to social distancing protocol, creating additional space between voting booths, poll workers, and voters standing in line, and to take other measures to protect the public's health?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

Q7b. In the upcoming November 3 election, would you be willing to **work as a poll worker**, if the polling place was reconfigured in order to adhere to social distancing protocol, creating additional space between voting booths, poll workers, and voters standing in line, and to take other measures to protect the public's health?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

Q8. In the upcoming November 3 election, would you be **comfortable dropping off your ballot at a drive-through location** professionally staffed by your county elections office, if it was reconfigured in order to adhere to social distancing protocol?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

Q9. 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**?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

Q10. 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**?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

Q11. 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?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

Q12. For the upcoming November 3 election, would you support national legislation directing all states to **allow voters to submit their voter registration form online**?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

Q13. When voters cast a ballot by mail, do you think election officials should **pre-pay the postage** on their ballot?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

Q14. When voters cast a ballot by mail, do you think those ballots should be **due back to election officials by Election Day** in order to be counted? This requirement would allow election officials to report results of the presidential race and other contests more quickly, even if delays by the postal service might cause some ballots to miss this deadline.

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

Q15. When voters cast a ballot by mail, do you think those ballots should be **postmarked by Election Day** in order to be counted? This requirement would allow ballots delayed by the postal service to be counted, even if it delays how long it will take election officials to report the results of the presidential race and other contests.

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

Q16. For the November 3rd election, **should the federal government provide funding** to state and local governments to ensure the availability of vote by mail ballots to all voters, to maintain in-person voting options, and to bolster online voter registration? The Brennan Center has estimated that the cost of supporting all of these measures would be \$2 billion. The recent COVID-19 Stimulus Bill passed by Congress provides \$400 million in grants to states. Do you favor:

- Additional funding to increase total federal support for the 2020 elections to \$2 billion
- Keeping total federal support for the 2020 elections at its current level of \$400 million
- Reducing federal funding so that it can be used for purposes other than the 2020 elections

Q17. How important is it to you that we **hold the presidential election as scheduled in November**, as federal law requires?

- Very important
- Somewhat important
- Not at all important
- Not sure

Q. 18. If you would like to learn how to apply for a vote by mail ballot in your state, if that is allowed, you can **visit a guide provided by the federal government** at the link below

- Yes, I would like to learn more by visiting <https://www.usa.gov/absentee-voting>
- I already expect to receive a vote by mail ballot
- I am not interested in this option