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Title

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Journal

California Journal of Politics and Policy, 12(1)

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Publication Date

2020

DOI

10.5070/P2cjpp1150411

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RESEARCH

HOW DO CALIFORNIANS WANT TO CAST THEIR BALLOTS DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS?

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Abstract. In April 2020, how did Californians of all demographic groups want to cast their ballots during the COVID-19 pandemic, what changes to the electoral process would they support during this critical moment, and how would reforms made in 2020 reshape our state's electorate in the future? We address these questions by analyzing a statewide survey of a diverse sample of 12,276 eligible voters (adult citizens) conducted April 8-22, 2020. As a whole, California's eligible voters plan to vote by mail more than ever before in November 2020. Voting by mail is the method that gives them the most confidence in the integrity of election results, and they are strongly supportive of policies that expand access to voting by mail. The level of support for voting by mail differs across California's diverse racial and ethnic groups. Consistent with past studies, our survey found that Latino and African-American eligible voters are generally less likely to prefer this method of voting than non-Latino whites and Asian Americans. It will be important to consider the potentially disparate impacts that any election administration changes could bring and to conduct broad outreach efforts. When presented with scientific projections predicting a fall peak in the impact of COVID-19, eligible voters were even more likely to prefer voting by mail and to express concerns about waiting in line or working at a polling place that did not adhere to social distancing protocols. Specifying a set of social distancing guidelines for in-person voting resolved these concerns for many eligible voters of all types.

Funding Acknowledgment: We are grateful to the University of California Office of the President's Multicampus Research Program for providing funding for this survey through the MRP-17-454899 grant.

I. Background and Research Approach

With the COVID-19 pandemic dramatically disrupting everyday life in California and across the nation, 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 delayed their presidential primary elections because of the public health crisis (Corasaniti and Saul 2020), while two US senators introduced legislation to expand voting by mail and adopt other new procedures in November's presidential contest (Bowden 2020). Leading election law scholars have advanced proposals to expand voting by mail and to make elections accessible (Hasen 2020, Persily and Stewart 2020), and President Trump has weighed in on the topic frequently. By the



end of September, twenty-three states had made a change to their vote by mail policies, allowing at least 84% of American voters to cast a ballot by mail (Rabinowitz and Mayes 2020).

California's public officials and county election administrators now face the challenge of holding safe and accessible elections during a public health crisis. Fifteen of these counties, in which more than half of the state's registered voters reside, will be doing so while administering the Voter's Choice Act, a new law that directs participating counties to mail every registered voter a vote-by-mail ballot which the voter can mail in, drop off at a secure ballot box, or drop off at a newly established Vote Center. In other counties, voters in the March primary had the option of choosing to receive a mail ballot or voting at a neighborhood polling place. Governor Gavin Newsom's May 8 executive order, later supported by state legislation, requires all counties to send every registered voter a vote-by-mail ballot in November while also allowing in-person options that closely resemble those in the Voter's Choice Act. In the 2020 general election and in future contests held during the pandemic, how can these new options be tailored to the varied needs and demands of different types of voters in California?

To bring the voices of members of the electorate into this vital policy conversation, we conducted parallel surveys of eligible voters in California and in the nation overall in April, 2020. This research is designed to provide data that can inform state and local policy decisions, while at the same time contributing to the political science literature about how different types of voters want to cast their ballot and whether that has changed during the pandemic. We conducted each survey online, recruiting our sample 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 our state and nation's citizen voting age populations. Coppock and McClellan (2019, 1) demonstrate that "demographic and experimental findings on Lucid track well with US national benchmarks." In analyses of a national survey, Kousser et. al (2020) have shown that eligible voters in America have become strongly supportive of vote-by-mail options, but find that there is an emerging partisan divide on these reforms (Lockhart et al. 2020).

In California, we focus on how eligible voters would like to see the November election run and how these views may change given different scenarios for the COVID-19 outbreak. We surveyed an especially large sample of eligible voters – 12,276 respondents – in order to gauge the perspective of members of the state's largest racial and ethnic groups. We fielded the survey from April 8-22, recording the views of a diverse sample in which 47.7% of respondents are white (non-Latino), 28.5% are Latino, 15.5% are Asian-American, and 9.2% are African-American (these numbers total 100.9% because some Latinos are members of other racial groups). Each of these figures are within 0.1 to 2.3 percentage points of the estimates for the state's citizen age voting population reported by the United States Census Bureau (2016). To further ensure that our findings reflect that population, we created survey weights based on the demographic characteristics of that population and report all results using those weights.

Because officials needed to plan to hold an election without knowing exactly how severe the COVID-19 crisis would be in the fall, we designed our survey to measure public opinion under different scenarios for the pandemic. We randomly divided our respondents into three groups. We presented two of these groups 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 would peak in the fall if social distancing measures are relaxed at that time. The third group did not read any projections from us. (At the end of the survey, we provided all



respondents with information about both sets of projections, including links to the scientific reports underlying them produced by the University of Washington and the other at Imperial College London.) Because the groups were divided randomly, any differences in their views on the elections can be attributed to the projections that they read. As policymakers learn more about the timing of the pandemic's largest impacts, this approach can help inform them about the preferences of eligible voters under different scenarios. The projections we presented to respondents are below:

The **spring peak** scenario: "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."

The **fall peak** scenario: "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 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."

II. How Do Californians Want to Cast their Own Ballots?

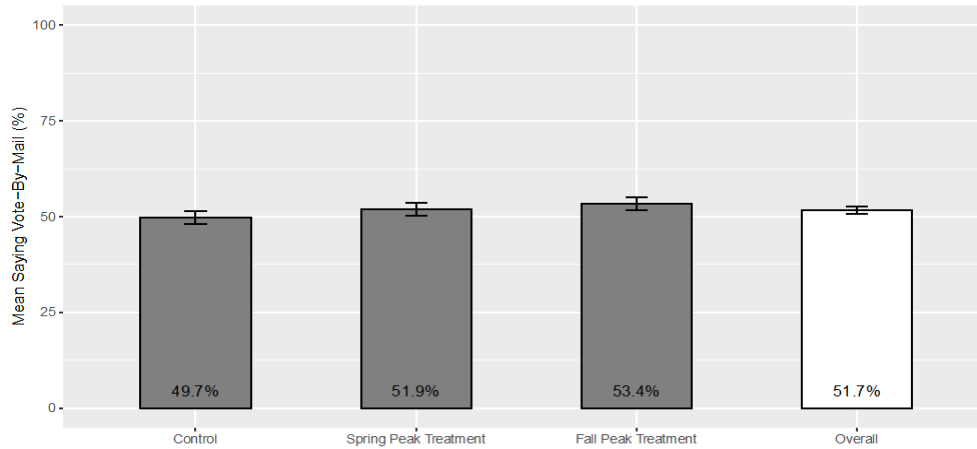
We present how our diverse sample of California's eligible voters prefer to cast their ballots in November in Figures 1 and 2. As with all of our pairs of figures, the first one reports how respondents overall answered a given question along with breakdowns that report the responses of those who read the "spring peak" and "fall peak" scenarios and those in the control condition, who did not read any projections. In the second figure, we break down responses by the state's largest racial and ethnic groups, ordered according to the percentage of the citizen voting-age population that they represent. Each column gives the percentage of a group answering the question a certain way, with the error bars around it representing the margin of error.

On the key question of how respondents would most prefer to cast their ballot, we found that overall 51.7% 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 figures, 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). It appears that the COVID-19 crisis has led Californians, who have long voted by mail at a relatively high rate, to embrace this option even more. Further evidence that suggests this shift is related to the public health crisis comes from our survey experiment presenting some respondents with scenarios about the pandemic. In line with our expectations, eligible voters were most likely to prefer to vote by mail when they read projections about a fall pandemic peak. The 53.4% of respondents who chose this option after reading the fall peak scenario was significantly higher than the 49.7% among those who were not exposed to a COVID-19 projection, with this difference significant at the 95% confidence level that is the common standard in social science research. Also significantly different from the control condition was the 51.9% of respondents preferring to vote by mail after reading projections of a spring peak. Although this effect was not as strong as the impact of the fall peak scenario, it suggests that exposure to any scientific information that brought COVID-19 to the top of respondents' minds shifted them away from preferring to vote in person and toward casting a mail ballot.

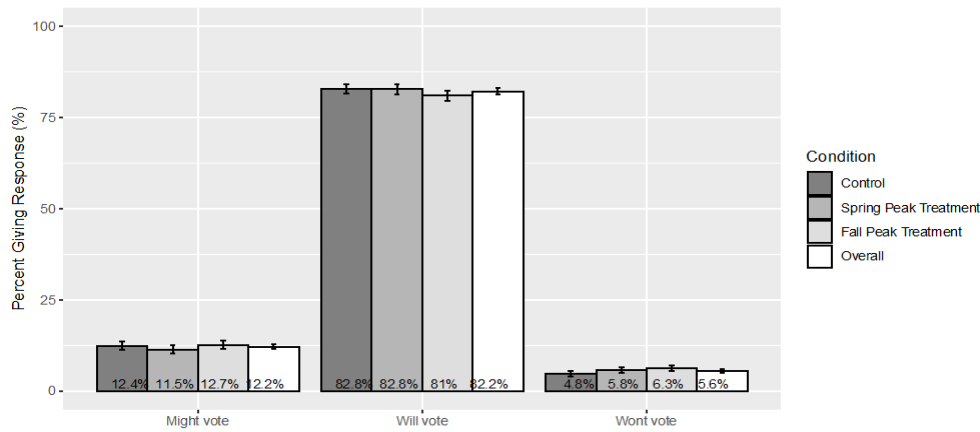


Figure 1. Personal Preferences on How to Cast a Ballot

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 an in-person option such as a traditional polling place or a professionally staffed county elections office, how likely would you be 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?

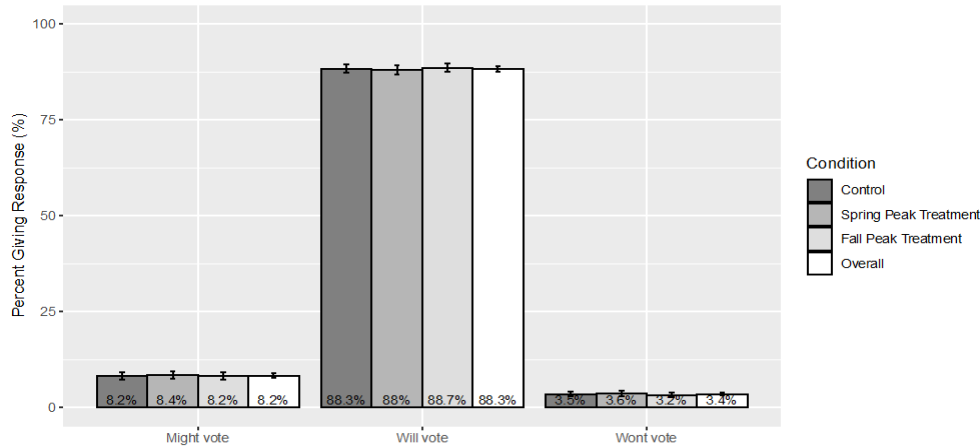
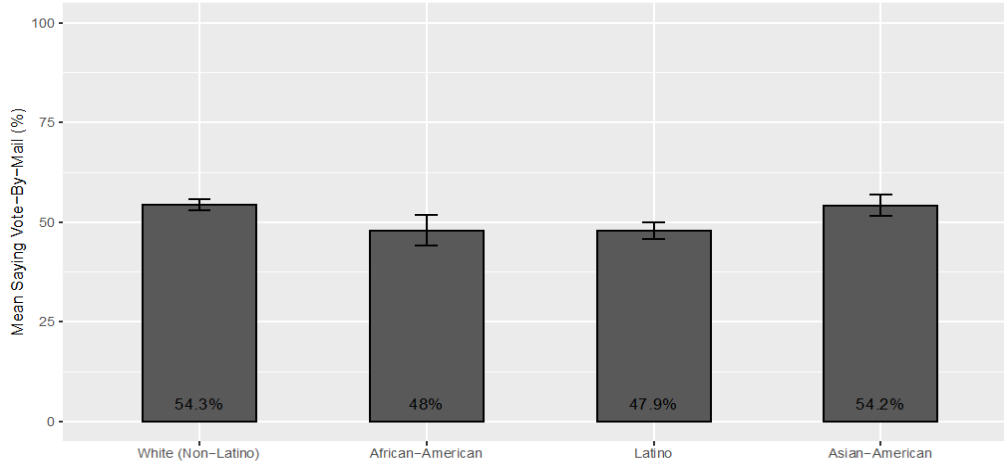


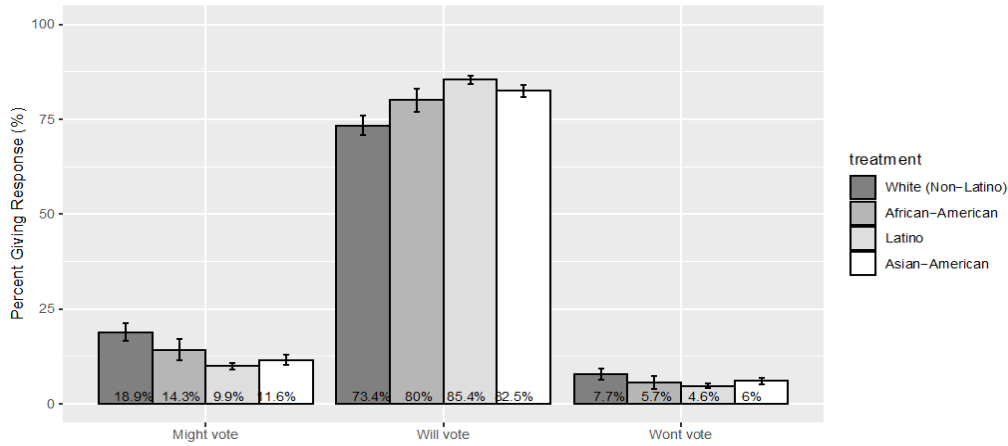


Figure 2. Personal Preferences on How to Cast a Ballot, by race and ethnicity

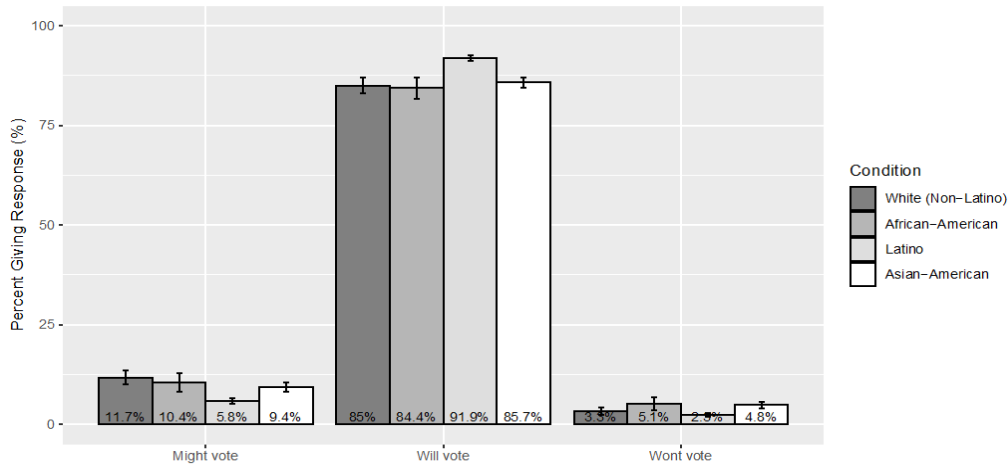
In the upcoming November 3 election, if you had the ability to cast a ballot in any way you wished, what would be your most preferred way to cast a ballot?



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





We also 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. (This excluded 1,296 respondents. In parallel analyses that we conducted including these respondents, our results were not substantively different). Overall, 5.6% responded that they would not vote if an in-person option was their only way to cast a ballot, with this rate being higher under the two COVID-19 scenarios. Looking at the last question, 3.4% overall reported that they would not vote if a mail ballot was their only option. 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 would be left out of the election. It will be important for state and local elections officials to conduct major outreach efforts designed to connect with those who prefer in-person voting options to keep them in California’s active electorate. Figure 2 breaks these questions down by racial and ethnic groups. Consistent with studies of voting in our state from 2002- 2012 conducted by the California Civic Engagement Project (2014), we find significant differences in preferences with 54.3% of non-Latino whites and 54.2% of Asian-American eligible voters selecting voting by mail as their top option, compared with 48.0% of African Americans and 47.9% of Latinos. These differences suggest that if any voting options are made completely unavailable to eligible voters, such changes could have a disparate impact across groups. When we asked likely voters (again, excluding the 1,296 respondents who had already reported that they were not likely to vote in November) whether they planned to cast a ballot if voting in person was their only option, 7.7% of non-Latino whites, 6% of Asian Americans, 5.7% of African Americans, and 4.6% of Latinos said that they would not vote. When we asked if they would vote if a mail ballot was their only option, 5.1% of African Americans, 4.8% of Asian Americans, 3.3% of non-Latino whites, and 2.3% of Latinos responded that they would not vote.

In analyses that we do not report here, we also investigated whether members of each racial and ethnic group responded differentially to our survey experiment exposing them to projections about COVID-19 scenarios. That is, did white respondents have one reaction to reading about a possible peak while Latinos, for instance, had a different reaction? We did not find any strong or consistent patterns indicating differential effects across any of our questions. While California’s major racial and ethnic groups do have different views about voting by mail, exposing them to scientific projections about the pandemic neither accentuated nor diminished these differences.

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. As Figure 3 shows, when we asked about comfort levels at polling places that did not implement social distancing, only half of those surveyed said that they would be comfortable waiting in line. This figure was lower, 46.5%, for those presented with the “fall peak” scenario, with that experimental effect significant at the 95% confidence level. Similarly, only 35.7% of respondents overall would feel comfortable being a poll worker in a precinct without social distancing, with this figure significantly lower, 32.2%, when a fall peak in the COVID-19 outbreak was projected. Notably, eligible voters became much more comfortable with waiting in lines (68.7%) or working at a polling place (47.4%) which adhered to a social distancing protocol, based on a set of recommendations provided by the NAACP (2020). Finally, respondents in every group were much more comfortable (83.9% overall) with dropping off their ballots at a drive-through location that followed social distancing, a method of casting or delivering ballots used in some states and counties.

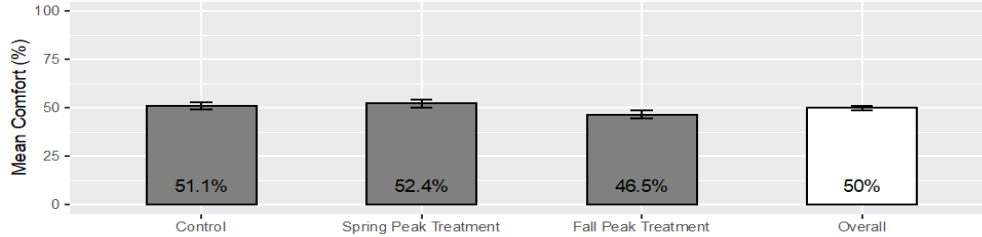


Figure 4 reveals important differences across racial and ethnic groups in average levels of comfort with in-person voting. Latino respondents were the most comfortable with waiting in line at a polling place that did not adhere to social distancing protocols (62%) and with being a poll worker in these conditions (53.6%). By contrast, Asian Americans were the least comfortable with waiting in line (36.3%) or working as a poll worker (22.7%) in the absence of social distancing. Average comfort levels by African-American and white respondents fell in between. For all groups, the level of comfort was significantly higher, often by fifteen to twenty percentage points, both for their comfort with waiting to vote and working as a poll worker when social distancing measures – such as space between voting booths, poll workers, and voters standing in line – were put in place to protect the public’s health. These findings show the paramount importance that California’s electorate places on social distancing measures for in-person voting during this pandemic, as well as how important it will be to educate the electorate about the social distancing measures that elections officials put in place.

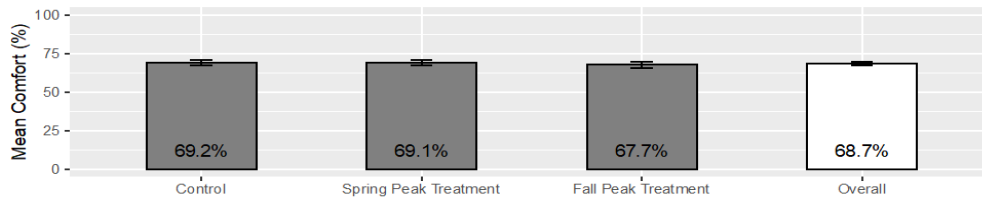


Figure 3. Level of Comfort at Polling Places with and without Social Distancing

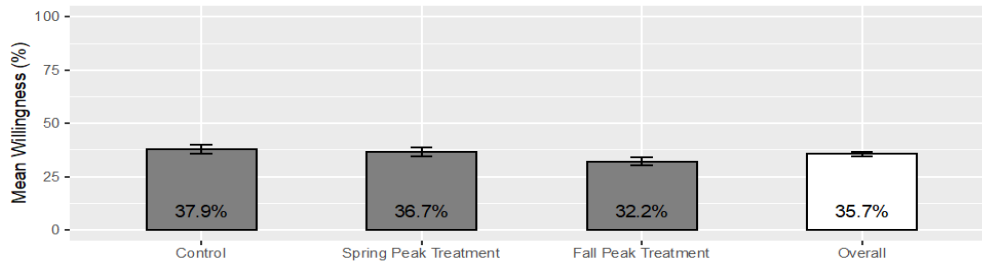
In the upcoming November 3 election, would you be comfortable waiting in line at a polling place, if there were no social distancing measures implemented at that polling place?



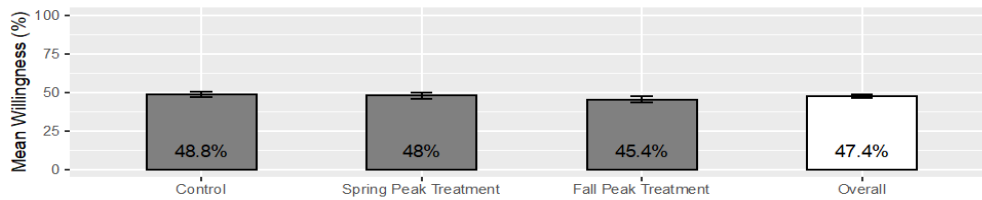
In the upcoming November 3 election, would you be comfortable waiting in line at a polling place, if the polling place was reconfigured in order to adhere to social distancing protocol, creating additional space between voting booths, poll workers, and voters standing in line, and to take other measures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



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?



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?



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?

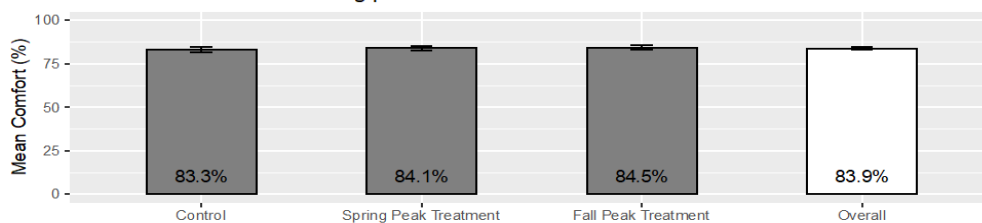
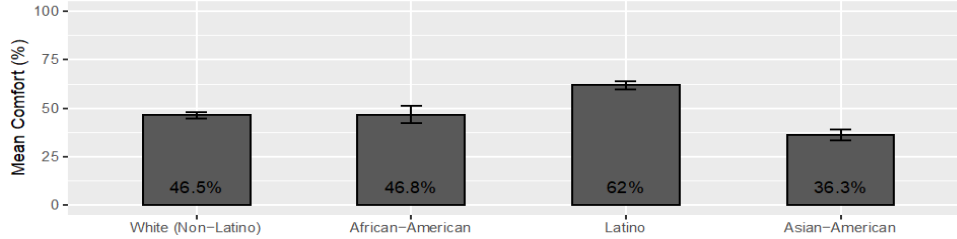


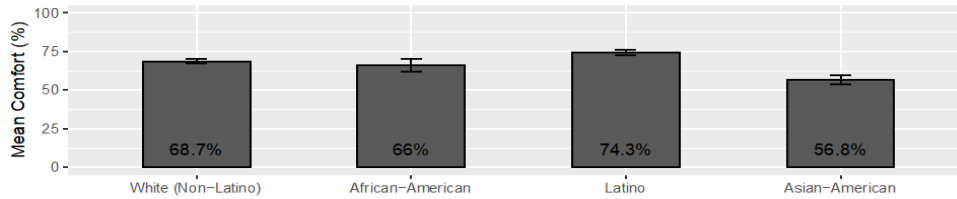


Figure 4. Comfort at Polling Places with and without Social Distancing, by race/ethnicity

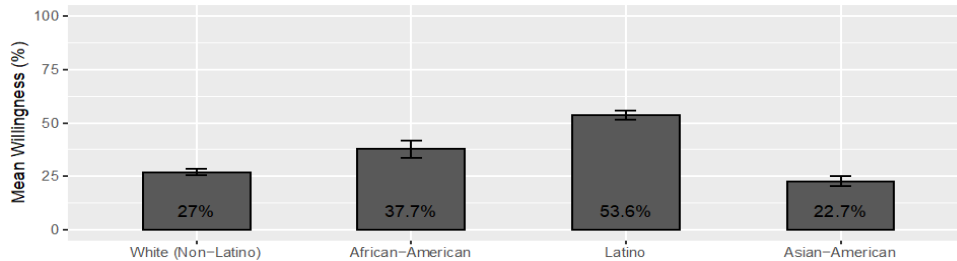
In the upcoming November 3 election, would you be comfortable waiting in line at a polling place, if there were no social distancing measures implemented at that polling place?



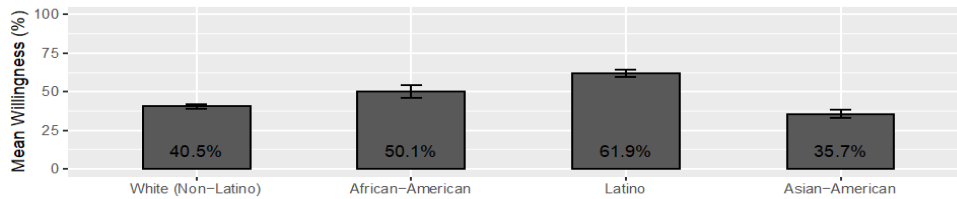
In the upcoming November 3 election, would you be comfortable waiting in line at a polling place, if the polling place was reconfigured in order to adhere to social distancing protocol, creating additional space between voting booths, poll workers, and voters standing in line, and to take other measures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



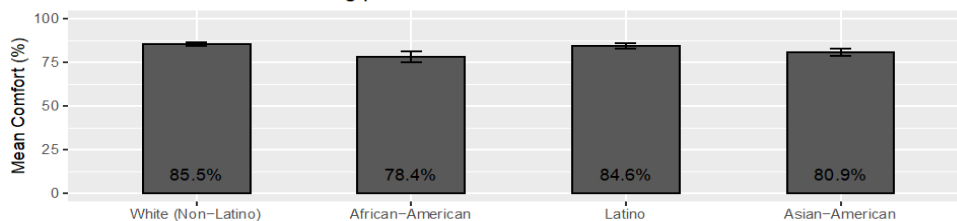
In the upcoming November 3 election, would you be willing to work as a poll worker, if there were no social distancing measures implemented at that polling place?



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?



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?



III. What Methods Make Californians Most Confident that Ballots Will Be Counted Correctly?

The two questions reported in Figure 5 ask eligible voters how confident they are that their own ballot and the ballots of others will be counted correctly if they are cast either by mail, at a polling place, or at a professionally-staffed vote center. Overall, 34.4% of Californians selected voting by mail as the method that gave them the most confidence that their own ballot would be counted correctly, and another 21.0% selected dropping off a mail ballot at a vote center or drop off box. When it came to which method provided the most confidence of the integrity of the results if *other voters* cast their ballot this way, 31.2% of respondents chose voting by mail with an additional 20.5% saying that when other voters drop off their ballots, it gave them the most confidence. These levels were similar for every COVID-19 scenario – this was an area in which our survey experiment exposing respondents to scientific projections did not yield significant effects.

Figure 5. Confidence that Ballots will be Counted Correctly

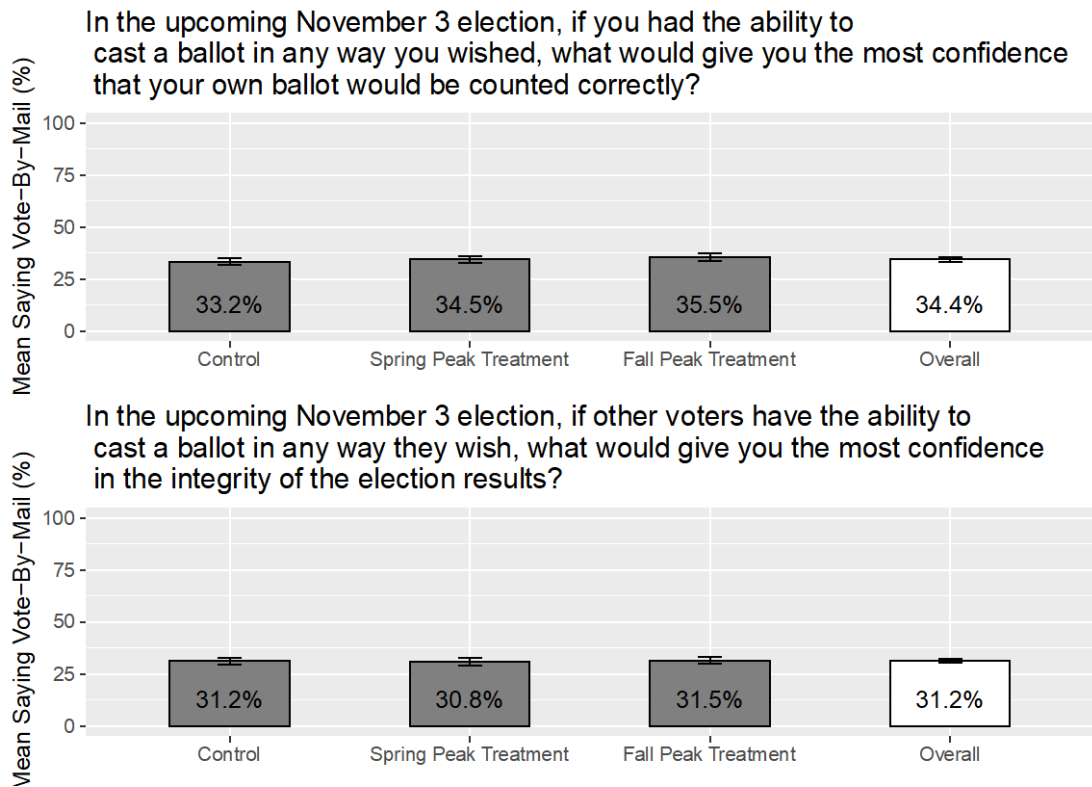
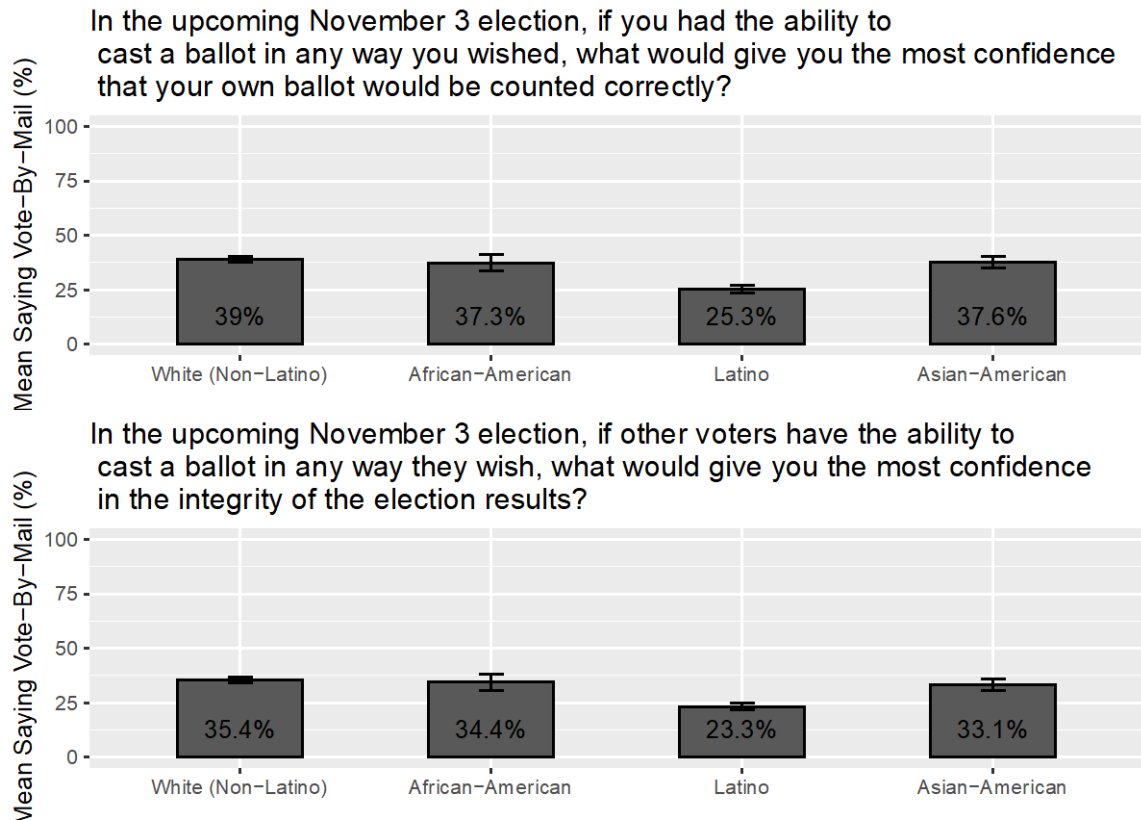


Figure 6 shows that there is one striking difference across demographic groups about which voting method gives them the most confidence. Significantly fewer Latinos (25.3%) selected voting by mail as the method that gave them the most confidence their ballots would be counted correctly, compared with Asian Americans (37.6%), African Americans (37.3%) or non-Latino whites (39.0%). Similarly, Latinos were significantly less likely than members of other groups to choose voting by mail by others as the method that gave them the most confidence in the integrity of election results. Figure 4 showed that Latinos in California were more comfortable than other groups waiting in line to vote in person or working as poll workers, and Figure 6 shows that they have more confidence in in-person voting than other groups.

Figure 6. Confidence that Ballots will be Counted Correctly, by race and ethnicity



IV. What Election Policies Do Californians Support in a Pandemic?

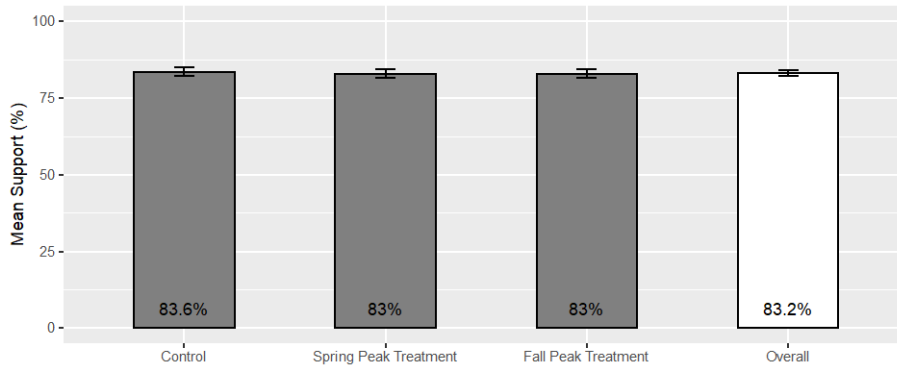
Finally, we report how respondents viewed some of the major policy proposals that have been advanced at the national and state levels to increase opportunities to cast mail ballots in the November 2020 election. The first question asked whether they would support national legislation directing all states 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, voters in sixteen states must provide a valid excuse to vote absentee. Figure 7 demonstrates the strong consensus in favor of no-excuse absentee voting among Californians, with 83.2% 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. The percentage of respondents who were unsure ranged from approximately 15% to 20%, depending on the policy.) Support for this policy was strong for voters in all COVID-19 scenarios, and none of those scenarios significantly impacted support for any of the policies. Overall, 72.3% of respondents taking a position favored a national law that would require states to send a mail ballot to every voter. And a strong majority of eligible California voters (66.8%) supported national legislation that would move the November 2020 election entirely to voting by mail, without having polling places or other in-person voting.



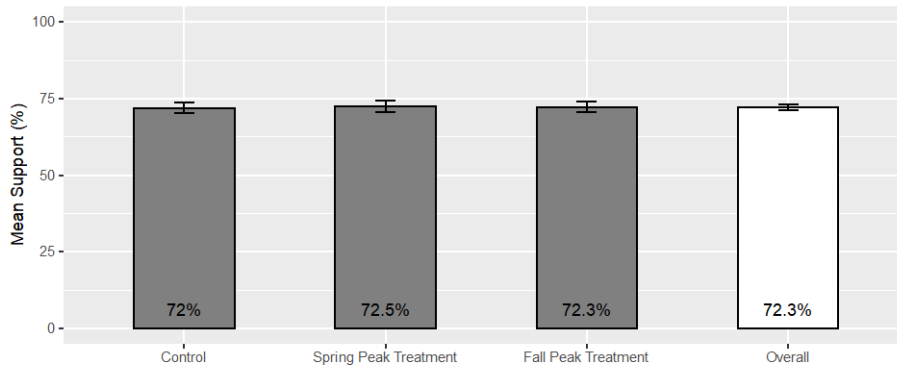
Figure 8 explores the demographic divides on these policy questions. Members of all racial and ethnic groups were strongly supportive of no-excuse absentee voting. On the question of whether to send a mail ballot to any voter who requests one, Latinos in California stood out as especially supportive of this policy, registering 78.6% support, which was six to nine percentage points higher than any other group. Finally, differences were also apparent regarding the question of

Figure 7. Policy Views on Voting by Mail

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?

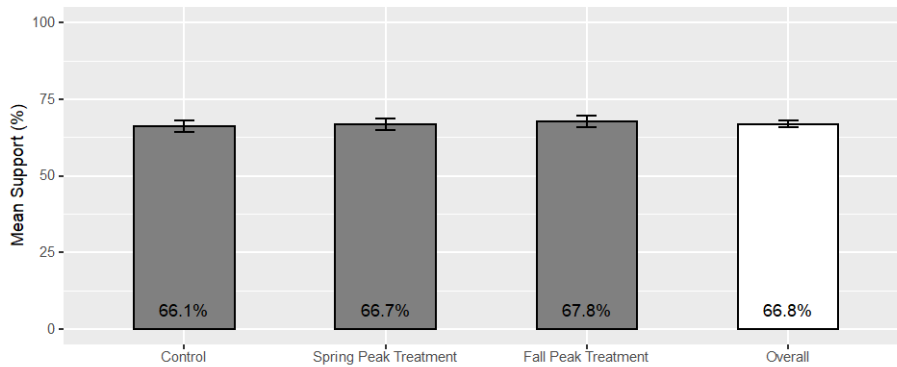
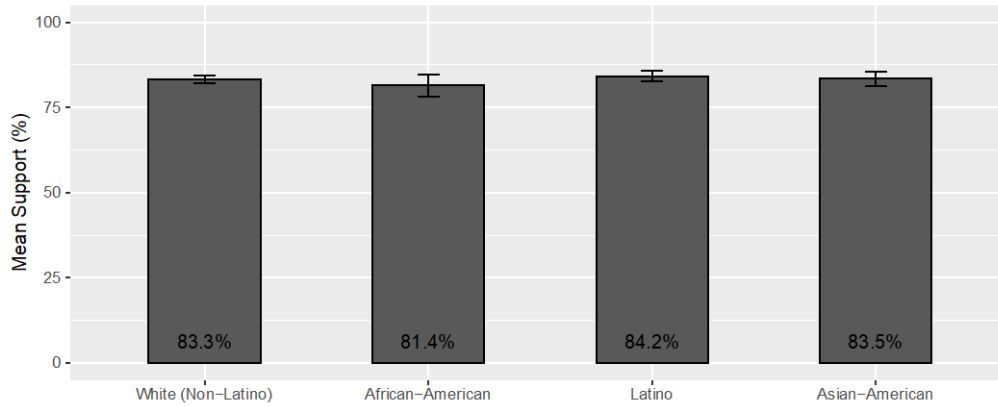


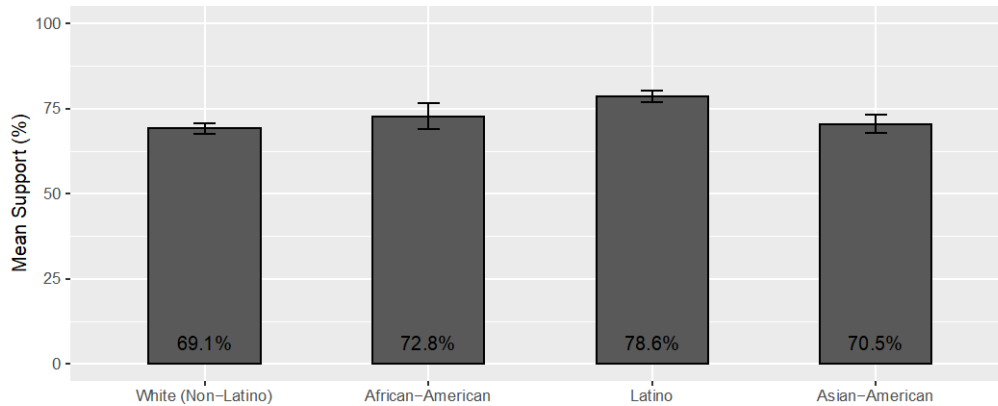


Figure 8. Policy Views on Voting by Mail, by race and ethnicity

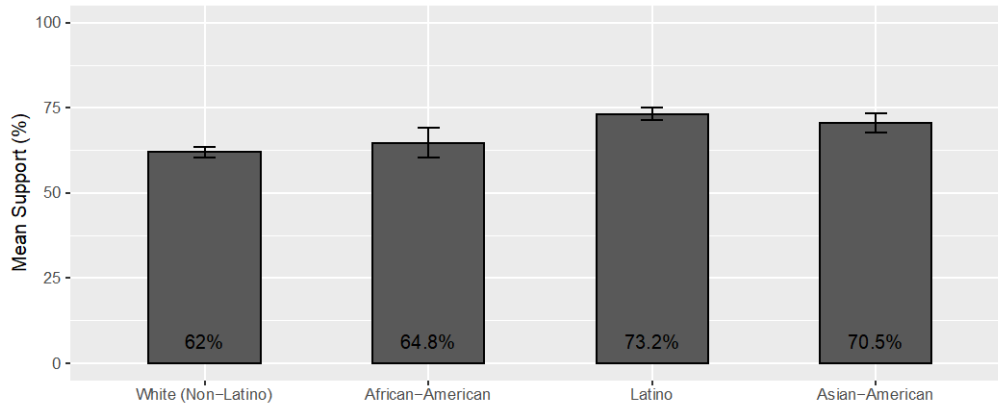
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For the upcoming November 3 election, would you support national legislation directing all states to send a vote by mail ballot to every voter, even if they do not request one in advance



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?



moving elections entirely to vote by mail. Support for this proposal was lowest among non-Latino whites (62%), higher among African Americans (64.8%) and Asian Americans (70.5%), and highest among Latinos (73.2%).



One intriguing pattern that emerges from our racial and ethnic breakdowns across questions are the potentially paradoxical policy views of Latino respondents, given their views on voting preferences. Consistent with past findings from the California Civic Engagement Project (2014), Latinos are less likely than non-Latino whites to prefer to vote by mail. We also find that Latinos in our study are less confident that voting by mail will lead to their ballots being counted correctly and more comfortable waiting in line at a polling place. Yet, Latinos are also more supportive of policies that allow voting by mail. Perhaps many Latino voters, who were less likely to use this mode of voting in state elections from 2002-2012 (California Civic Engagement Project 2014), are less familiar than other groups with voting by mail, but open to policies that facilitate it. Future surveys conducted after the November 2020 election – in which far more Californians in every group are likely to cast a mail ballot than in prior contests – should focus on emerging trends in how Latino eligible voters in our state view each mode of voting.

V. Conclusions

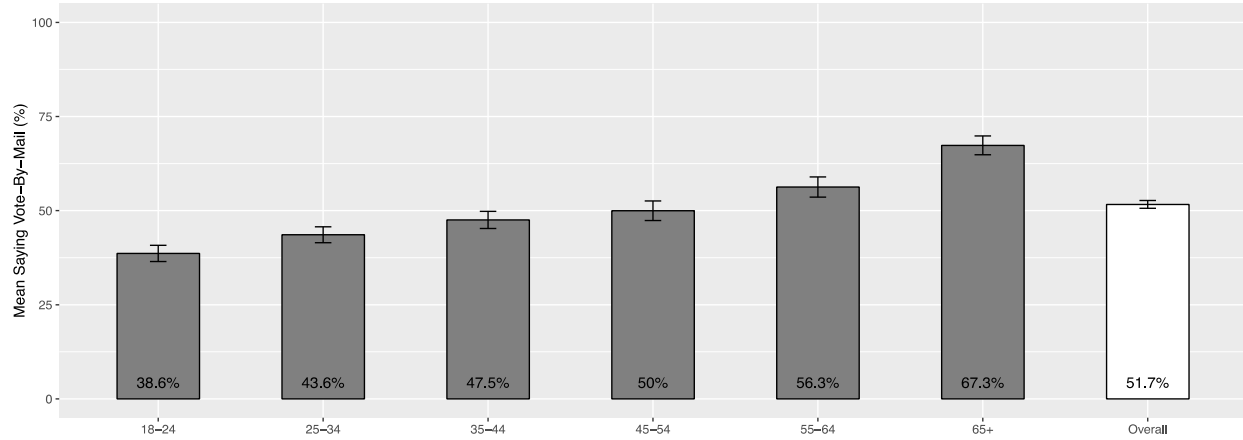
Overall, a strong majority of California's eligible electorate would prefer to cast a ballot by mail in November's election, and this is the method of voting that gives them the most confidence that their ballot and the ballots of others will be counted correctly. Still, not all Californians favor this option – choices about how to cast ballots vary significantly across the diverse racial and ethnic groups in our electorate, and some voters say that they would not participate in the election if it is conducted either exclusively through the mail or exclusively through in-person options. When thinking about in-person voting experiences, voters who read scientific projections about a scenario in which the COVID-19 crisis peaks in the fall were especially uncomfortable at the prospect of waiting in line or working at a polling place. There were also significant differences by race and ethnicity in comfort levels, but voters of all types under all scenarios became much more comfortable with casting ballots in a polling place that adheres to social distancing protocols. (In our Appendix, we present parallel analyses that explore differences across age groups.)

As policymakers and election officials plan to hold the November 2020 contest and future elections during an unprecedented public health challenge, the views of a representative sample of California's diverse electorate can help to guide their difficult choices. It is important to note that these are their survey responses, rather than measures of behavior, and whether the preferences that they expressed about how to cast ballots shapes their participation will be revealed in November, 2020.

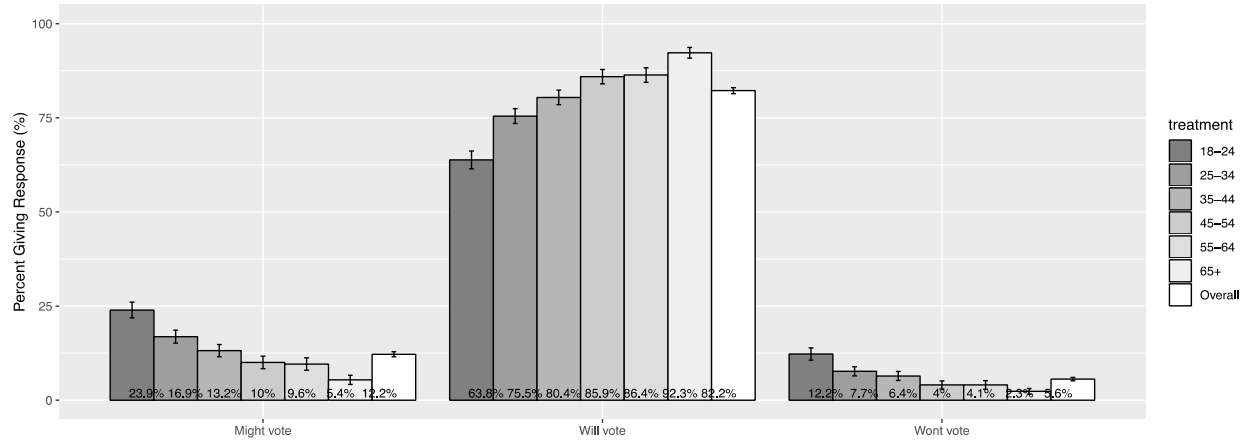


Appendix

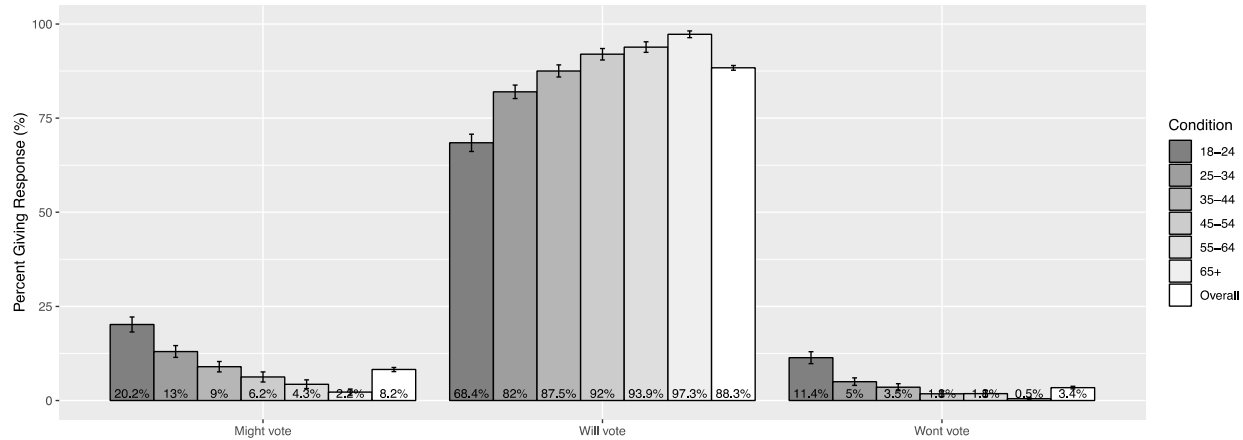
In the upcoming November 3 election, if you had the ability to cast a ballot in any way you wished, what would be your most preferred way to cast a ballot?



Q 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 office, how likely would you be to cast a ballot?

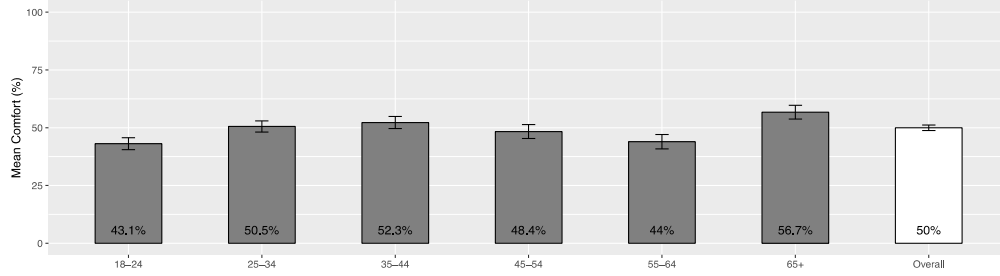


In the upcoming November 3 election, if your only option to cast a ballot in your county was to vote by mailing in a ballot, how likely would you be to cast a ballot?

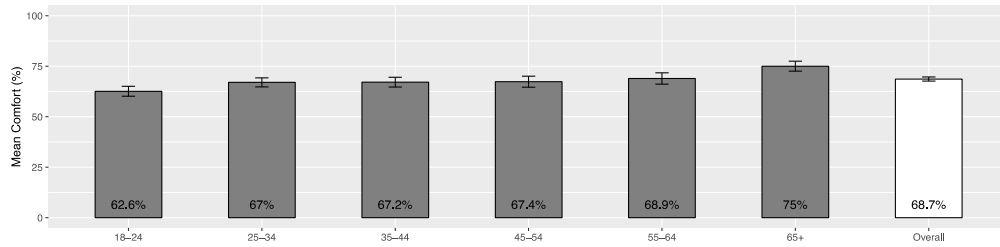




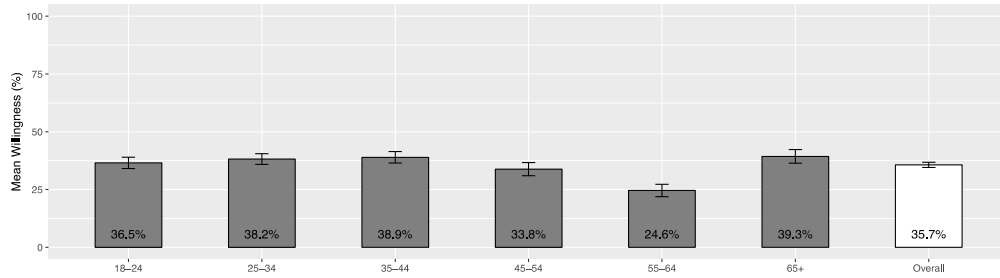
In the upcoming November 3 election, would you be comfortable waiting in line at a polling place, if there were no social distancing measures implemented at that polling place?



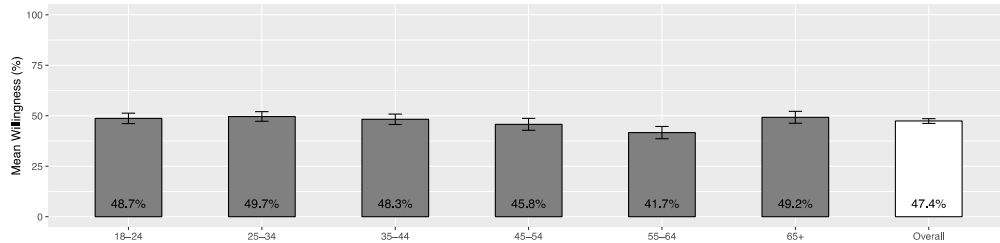
In the upcoming November 3 election, would you be comfortable waiting in line at a polling place, if the polling place was reconfigured in order to adhere to social distancing protocol, creating additional space between voting booths, poll workers, and voters standing in line, and to take other measures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



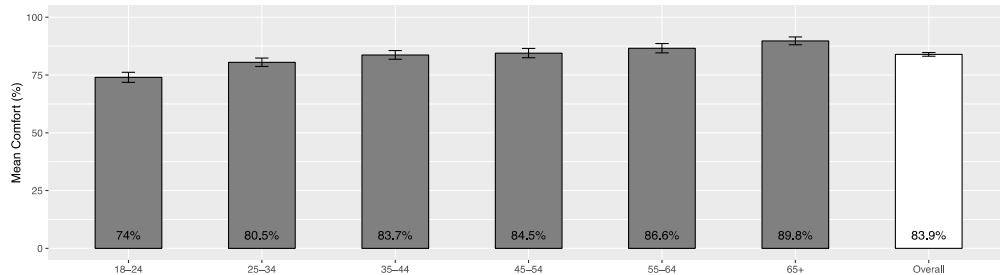
In the upcoming November 3 election, would you be willing to work as a poll worker, if there were no social distancing measures implemented at that polling place?



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?



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?





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