

Postal Voting in the 2020 Election

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ABSTRACT

Using a large-scale nationally representative survey of voters, we offer a depiction of voting by mail during the 2020 presidential election cycle. During this election-cycle mail voting was by far the most prevalent form for voting, accounting for 46% of all votes cast. The 2020 election-cycle was characterized not only by the COVID-19 pandemic, but also efforts in many states to expand the vote by mail option as a means of mitigating the effects of this health crisis. Running counter to this effort was former President Donald Trump's assertion that vote by mail was tainted by high levels of voter fraud. In this short article, we seek to create a profile of who voted by mail in the 2020 presidential election, the reasons they did so, and how these voters evaluated the overall process. In general, fear of COVID-19 was positively associated with the usage of mail in voting, although rates did vary by presidential vote choice with Trump supporters less likely to have relied on this form of voting. In terms of voter confidence, vote by mail actually scored higher than early in-person or Election Day precinct voting. Again, evaluations were colored through the lens of partisan perceptions as Trump voters demonstrated lower confidence levels for vote by mail. While the pandemic has abated, the future of vote by mail utilization levels would appear to hinge on a number of factors, including partisan perceptions of the process and the ease of the process within the state in question.

The 2020 Presidential election produced the highest voter turnout in over 100 years. This occurred despite the first worldwide pandemic in a century and an unprecedented attack on the institution of mail-assisted voting by an incumbent President and his party.

In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, states and local jurisdictions sought out ways to protect voters and poll workers from contracting and spreading the virus during the 2020 election. In addition to encouraging social distancing and the wearing of face masks, many states and voters took up mail voting as means of avoiding in-person contact and exposure to the virus.

In 2020, 11 states expanded voter opportunities to vote by mail (VBM) (NCSL 2020). According to the Current Population Survey (CPS) dataset, an estimated 46% of voters cast a mail ballot in 2020, up from 21% in 2016. The increase in mail voting occurred despite President Donald Trump's persistent claims that "mail-in ballots will lead to massive electoral fraud and a rigged 2020

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election” (Rizzo 2020). How did fear from COVID-19, Republican partisan resistance to mail voting, and states’ efforts to protect voters and poll workers shape mail voting in the 2020?

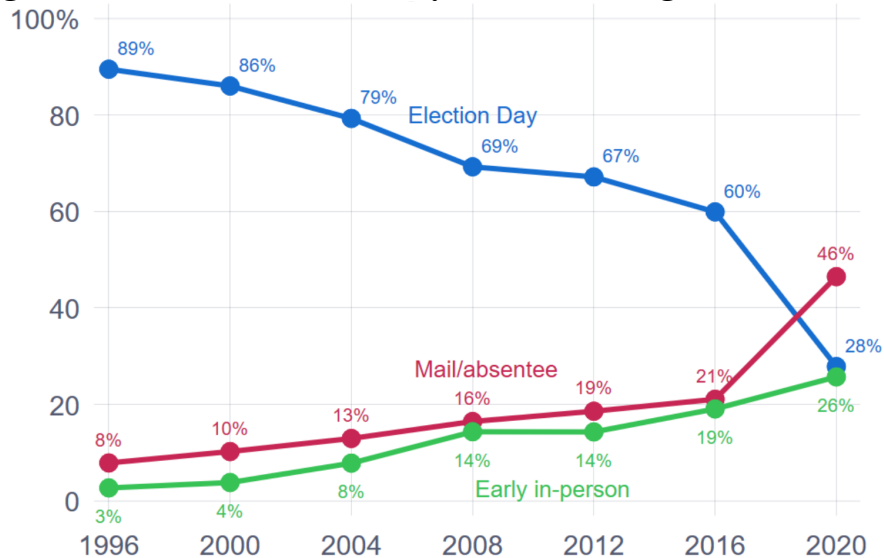
We address four questions about mail voting in the 2020 election in this article: Who voted by mail in 2020 and why? Who switched to mail voting from another mode of voting in 2020 and why? What were the experiences of mail voters in the 2020 election? Who is likely to continue voting by mail in the future and why? Our inquiry and answers to these questions are descriptive and more suggestive than definitive of how the 2020 election may shape the incidence of postal voting in future elections.

Drawing on a national post-election survey of 2020 voters, we identify first-time mail voters and continuing mail voters in states with different and new opportunities for mail voting. Our sample of all 2020 voters is sufficiently granular (approximately ten thousand mail voters) to distinguish between the experiences of mail-in voters in states with different types of postal voting, threats from COVID-19, and partisan preferences.

The History of Mail Assisted Voting

Mail-in voting has been practiced in U.S. federal elections since 1864. In 1978, California (Patterson and Caldeira 1995) was the first state to adopt no-excuse mail-in voting, allowing any eligible voter to vote by mail-in ballot even if they were not going to be away from their residence on Election Day and/or did not otherwise have a qualifying excuse (e.g., over 65 or voter with a disability). Since then, the practice has expanded dramatically. By 2018, 27 states had adopted no-excuse mail-in ballot systems. More recently, and largely due to the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic, all but five states allowed no-excuse mail-in voting in the 2020 presidential election. The remaining states allowed mail-in voting for persons over 65 years of age, disabled persons, persons out of the jurisdiction on Election Day and, in some states, incarcerated persons.

Figure 1: Fraction of Ballot Cast by Different Voting Modes, 1996-2020



Data sources: Census Bureau, Voting and Registration Supplement, 1996 - 2016; SPAE, 2020

The popularity of mail-in voting is best measured by the proportion of votes cast by mail. As is apparent in Figure 1, since the turn of the century, the share of votes cast by all forms of mail-in

voting has risen nearly three-fold, from 7.8% in 1996 to 21.1% in 2016. In 2020, the percent of votes cast by mail rose to 46%.

In 2020, every state and the District of Columbia allowed at least some of its voters to cast their ballots by mail (NCSL 2020). Mail-in voting, however, comes in several forms. Consistent with the U.S. federal system, states offer different options for mail-in voting and allow for local variation within each state to account for more specific considerations.² There are three distinct types of mail-in voting defined largely by who can exercise this option and how voters obtain and return their mail-in ballots. Table 1 groups states by these three categories. The most restrictive form is excuse-only mail-in voting. Five states in the 2020 presidential election restricted mail-in voting to specific individuals, usually voters who were over 65 years old, disabled, or out of the jurisdiction on Election Day.³ The largest number of states (36) practiced no-excuse mail-in voting in 2020, allowing any person to vote by mail regardless of whether they have a reason. In 27 of these states, persons eligible and seeking to vote by mail had to request a mail-in ballot application prior to the election.⁴ Nine states with mail-in voting automatically mailed every voter an application to vote by mail in 2020. Another nine states and the District of Columbia in 2020 conducted universal vote-by-mail elections in which the state (or a local entity such a county or municipality) mailed all registered voters a ballot before each election without a voter having to request one (NCSL 2020).

Table 1. Mail Voting in the 2020 Presidential Election

Category	States	% of Total Registrants
Ballots Mailed to All Registrants	CA, CO, DC, HI, NJ, NV, OR, UT, VT, WA	21.3% [44.6 mil.]
No Excuse (Includes Pandemic Exception)	AL, AK, AZ, AR, CT, DE, FL, GA, ID, IL, IA, KS, KY, ME, MD, MA, MI, MN, MO, MT, NE, NH, NM, NY, NC, ND, OH, OK, PA, RI, SC, SD, VA, WV, WI, WY	64.6% [133.7 mil.]
Non-Pandemic Excuse Required	IN, LA, MS, TN, TX	13.8% [28.6 mil.]

Sources: 2020 EAVES Report; [fivethirtyeight.com](https://www.fivethirtyeight.com).

²In some states the number, type, and location of places for dropping off mail ballots vary by county. States vary when mail ballots have to be returned and whether local jurisdictions can mail unsolicited mail ballot applications to eligible voters.

³New York and South Carolina require an excuse to vote by mail. Because of the pandemic, voters in these two states were allowed to vote by mail without an excuse during the 2020 presidential election.

⁴Although some states allow voters to request a mail-in ballot online, most require mail-in ballots to be requested in-person or by mail. Some states have permanent mail-in voting for those eligible. This allows the eligible mail-in voter to obtain a mail-in ballot before each election without having to make a separate request for each election.

Data and Measures of Voting in the 2020 Election

We draw on a national survey of 2020 voters to study both mail and in-person voting. Surveys were conducted online, with voters in all 50 states. Email addresses for 1.2 million voters were purchased from several commercial vendors of voter files.⁵ Surveys were solicited and completed between November 11, 2020, and February 9, 2021. We obtained 19,475 completed surveys from all 50 states, with at least 200 responses from each state. Completed surveys included 10,145 persons who reported voting by mail in the 2020 election. Responses were weighted to represent the national share of votes cast in each state and for selected demographics from the *2020 Current Population Survey* including age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, and mode of voting. An important feature of our survey is that we can determine the voting histories of our respondents from official voting records; thus, we do not rely on respondents' self-reported voting history.⁶

Who Voted by Mail in 2020?

Previous research (Stewart 2016) shows little demographic variation in the use of mail ballots during the 2016 election. The exception is age, where many states with excuse-only mail voting do allow persons over 65 to vote by mail. A higher proportion of Republicans voted by mail in the 2016 election cycle, but this was due in part to the greater share of Republican voters over the age of 65. The age profile of mail voters changed very little in 2020. A substantially higher proportion of voters in all age categories voted by mail, but the age differential did not change. In 2016, Stewart (2016) reports a nine-percentage point differential in the proportion of voters over 65 (31%) and under 65 (22%) voting by mail. As seen in Table 2, we find that 54% of voters over 65 voted by mail in 2020 compared to 44% of voters under 35, for a 13-percentage age differential among the oldest and youngest categories of voters.

**Table 2: Respondent Age by Voting Method
(% by Row)**

Age	Voting Method			
	Mail	Early	Election Day	Total N
< 35	44.20	24.13	31.68	4,921
35-65	39.64	24.74	35.62	9,158
65+	53.71	23.02	23.27	3,46
Total N	7,640	4,239	5,616	17,496

⁵ On-line surveys were solicited from approximately 1.2 million registered voters in all 50 states. Email addresses for registered voters were purchased from L2. A total of 12,140 online surveys were completed from L2's sample of registered voters for a response rate of 1%. An additional 7,225 online interviews were conducted in selected states using Dynata's *Voter Research Panel*. For a further discussion of the sample, response rates, survey questions and frequencies go to: <https://voteintegrity.blogs.rice.edu>

⁶Validated voting histories for all survey respondents were purchased from L2 and Dynata. Neither L2 nor Dynata provide validated method of voting. We rely on the respondent's self-reported method of voting.

As demonstrated in Table 3, differences among partisans voting by mail skewed in the 2020 election, with a significantly greater proportion of Democrats (55%) reporting they voted by mail than Republicans (31%). Only 36% of Trump supporters over the age of 65 reported voting by mail. Sixty-four percent of Biden supporters over the age of 65 reported voting by mail. This is a remarkable change from 2016 when less than a quarter of partisans of either major party reported voting by mail (Stewart 2016).

**Table 3: Respondent Party by Voting Method
(% by Row)**

Party	Voting Method			
	Mail	Early	Election Day	Total N
Rep	31.21	27.24	41.55	7,195
Ind	45.82	20.71	33.47	2,646
Dem	54.65	22.61	22.73	7,658
Total N	7,644	4,240	5,616	17,501

The strong partisan skew in mail voting in the 2020 election cycle most likely reflects President Trump's charge that mail voting was be used by Democrats to "steal" the 2020 election (Rizzo 2020). The President's charge of fraudulent mail-in voting was a continuation of the same charge he made about the 2016 election. To illustrate the extent to which Trump's message of election fraud shaped his supporters' perception of the 2020 election, we examine whether voters believed that election fraud changed the outcome of the election in their state. Seventy percent of Trump voters believed that absentee mail ballots are stolen and discarded most or all of the time. Only 12% of Biden voters believed this was true in the 2020 election. This demonstrates the effectiveness of Trump's electoral fraud message and can help explain the extent to which this may have had an impact on what mode of voting his voters opted to use in the 2020 election.

Table 4: Mail Ballots are Stolen and Thrown Away by Presidential Candidate Choice

Presidential Candidate Choice	Voted absentee ballots are stolen and thrown away after being submitted					
	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Most of the time	All of the time	Total N
Trump	7.35	11.90	10.22	51.22	19.30	6,339
Biden	53.16	25.23	9.53	7.11	4.96	6,962
Total	4,167	2,511	1,311	2,742	1,569	13,301

How influential were President Trump's charges about mail voting on his supporters' decision to vote by mail, especially given the threat from COVID-19? One means of answering this question is to examine the proportion of voters citing concern about contracting and spreading COVID-19 as a reason to vote by mail by Presidential vote choice. Among Biden supporters, 78% cited fear of contracting COVID-19 as a reason for voting for mail. Only 16% of Trump supporters cited COVID-19 as a reason for voting by mail. For Trump supporters, the modal reasons for voting by mail were

work conflicts (37%), disability (37%), and travel out of the voting jurisdiction (47%), all traditional reasons for absentee mail-in voting.

All survey respondents were asked how concerned they were about contracting and spreading the COVID-19 virus (see Table 5). Eighty-seven percent of Biden supporters reported some concern about exposure to the COVID-19 virus compared to only 48% of Trump supporters.

Table 5: Presidential Choice by Concern with COVID-19
(% by Row)

Presidential Candidate Choice	How worried are you that you or someone in your family will be exposed to COVID-19				
	Not worried at all	Not too worried	Somewhat worried	Very worried	Total N
Trump	22.57	29.44	30.49	17.50	7,638
Biden	3.23	9.97	40.02	46.78	8,529
Total N	1,999	3,099	5,742	5,326	16,167

Biden voters were clearly motivated to vote by mail if they were *somewhat* or *very worried* about contracting or spreading the virus. Eighty-seven percent of Biden supporters who reported voting by mail also reported some concern about COVID-19. There is a muted relationship between the likelihood of Trump voters to vote by mail and their concern about COVID-19. Among Trump voters who reported voting by mail in the 2020 election 44% reported they were not at all concerned or not too concerned about COVID-18; 56% of Trump supporters who voted by mail said they were somewhat or very concerned they or someone in their family would be exposed to COVID. We infer from these findings that President Trump's supporters entered the 2020 election with considerably less fear about contracting COVID-19 and less motivated to vote by mail. Together, these findings suggest that President Trump's supporters were very susceptible to his reproach to voting by mail, either directly or because of diminished concern about contracting the virus.

Eligibility to vote by mail is an obvious constraint on a voter choosing to vote by mail. In 2020, all states afforded their voters an option to vote by mail. More than two-thirds of states did not require an excuse to vote by mail and 11 more states relaxed excuses for voting by mail to include fear of contracting COVID-19 for the 2020 election. Did these changes in state laws regulating mail voting in the 2020 election attract new mail-in voters? States that adopted no-excuse mail voting for the 2020 election experienced a higher rate of voting by mail (33%) than those states that continued to require an excuse to vote by mail (26%). In states with no-excuse mail voting, 55% of the vote was cast by mail, and in states with only mail-in voting, 79% of votes were cast by mail.⁷

In 2020, African-American voters reported lower levels of mail voting (35%) than white voters (43%). Forty-five percent of Hispanic voters reported voting by mail. The highest rate of mail voting occurred among Asian-American (65%) and voters of Middle Eastern origin (85%). An equal proportion of women and men (43%) reported voting by mail in 2020.

The partisan skew in mail voting in the 2020 presidential election was influenced by President Trump's attack on the legitimacy of mail voting and efforts by Democrats to expand mail voting as a means of protecting voters and poll workers from contracting and spreading COVID-19. The threat

⁷Though all voters in states with vote by mail elections receive an unsolicited ballot in the mail, on average, a third of voters return their ballots in-person on or before Election Day (Menger and Stein 2020).

⁸ In 2021, twelve states enacted new laws restricting mail voting ("Voting Laws Roundup: October 2021").

from COVID-19 and expanded opportunities to vote by mail worked to swell the ranks of mail voting, but largely among Democrats and Biden supporters. Conversely, attacks on mail voting from President Trump depressed Republicans from taking up mail voting, even among those who feared contracting COVID-19.

Who Switched to Mail Voting in 2020?

Another means of assessing who voted by mail in 2020 is to identify first-time mail voters. All mail voters were asked whether they had previously voted by mail. Those who responded “no” were identified as first-time mail voters. Among voters who cast their ballot by mail in 2020, 22.6% reported voting by mail for the first time. Why? Were first time mail voters more likely to choose mail voting for different reasons than voters were who voted by mail in previous elections?

Fifty-seven percent of first-time mail voters cited fear from contracting COVID-19 as a reason for voting by mail in 2020. For those who had previously voted by mail prior to 2020, 42% reported COVID-19 as reason for voting by mail in 2020. For first-time mail voters, fear of COVID-19 was a motivating factor in choosing to vote by mail. Moreover, first-time mail voters in 2020 were frequent voters; all first-time mail voters in 2020 reported voting in 2016, and 89% voted in the 2018 midterm election. We infer from this information that first-time mail voters converted from in-person voting to mail voting largely to avoid the threat of COVID-19.

Two-thirds (68%) of Biden supporters reported voting by mail for the first time in the 2020 election; only 32% of Trump voters reported they voted by mail for first time in the 2020. Concern for contracting and spreading COVID-19 was cited by first time voters among both Trump and Biden supporters as a reason for voting by mail in 2020. Among Trump supporters who reported voting by mail for the first time in the 2020 election, 35% cited concern about COVID-19 as a reason for voting by mail. Among Biden supporters who reported voting by mail for first time, 32% reported COVID-19 as a reason for voting by mail.

First-time mail voters were responsive to the threat from COVID-19 and their respective states’ new opportunities to vote by mail. Moreover, these relationships, at least for first time mail voters, were not muted by partisanship and the strong anti-mail voting messaging from President Trump.

Table 6: Reasons for Voting by Mail (Multiple Responses Allowed)

	Previous Mail Voters	New Mail Voters
Convenience	61.0%	38.9%
COVID-19	42.3%	57.6%
Total N	3,883	3,554

Note: New mail voters are defined as voters who voted by mail in 2020 and reported having never voted by mail before.

Among previous mail voters, a plurality (39%) cited convenience as the reason for voting by mail. In contrast, more than half (58%) of new mail voters reported the pandemic as a reason they voted by mail in the 2020 presidential election. Whether new mail voters continue to vote by mail in the future could rest on their voting experience in 2020, and the continued threat of a pandemic, a topic we turn to in the next section.

Voting Experience and Confidence

Survey respondents were asked to rate their voting experience in the 2020 elections. Mail voters were also asked whether they would vote by mail in future elections. Fifty-nine of all voters rated their voting experience as excellent. Voter partisanship differentiates their voting experience in 2020, but only modestly. Among Trump supporters, 87% rated their voting experience good or excellent; 97% of Biden supporters rated their voting experience as either good or excellent (see Table 7).

**Table 7: Presidential Choice by Voting Experience
(% by Row)**

Presidential Candidate Choice	Q4.1 - How would you rate your voting experience overall?				
	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent	Total N
Trump	4.13	8.74	40.37	46.76	7,448
Biden	0.32	2.75	25.16	71.77	8,595
Total N	346	913	5,291	9,794	16,346

Table 8 examines voter experience by voting method for the 2020 presidential election. The highest rated mode of voting in 2020 was mail voting. Sixty-six percent of mail voters rated their voting experience as excellent, compared to 54% of early in-person voters and 54% of Election Day votes. Sixty-three percent of new mail voters rated their voting experience as excellent; 71% of experienced mail voters in 2020 rated their voting experienced as excellent.

**Table 8: Voting Method by Voting Experience
(% by row)**

Voting Method	Q4.1 - How would you rate your voting experience overall?				
	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent	Total N
Absentee/vote by mail	2.59	4.30	27.64	65.47	7,635
Early in-person	1.78	5.98	38.35	53.89	4,239
Election Day in-person	2.13	8.13	35.88	53.86	5,609
Total N	393	1,037	5,748	10,305	17,484

Voters' confidence that their ballot was counted as they intended is a critical test for the integrity of any voting system and election. Mail voters, unlike in-person voters, rely on a larger number of actors to secure, complete, and return their mail ballot on time and for accurate tabulation. Past research (Alvarez et al 2008; Atkeson 2014; Atkeson and Saunders 2008; Bryant 2020) reported that mail voters were less confident than in-person voters that their ballot was counted as they intended. In the 2020 presidential election, this trend was reversed; fifty percent of mail voters reported they were *very confident* their ballot was counted as they intended (see Table 9). This compares with 23% and 26% of in-person early and Election Day voters who reported they were very confident their ballots were counted as they intended.

Table 9: Voter Confidence by Method of Voting

Q4.2 - How confident are you that YOUR vote in the General Election was counted	Voting Method			
	Mail	Early	Election Day	Total N
Not at all confident	33.89	29.30	36.80	1,382
Not too confident	26.64	30.97	42.38	1,305
Somewhat confident	34.77	24.20	41.03	4,342
Very confident	50.78	22.77	26.45	10,451
Total	7,633	4,239	5,607	17,481

Again, partisanship is strongly related to voter confidence among mail voters. Only 39% of Trump voters who voted by mail were very confident their ballot was counted as they intended. Among Biden supporters who voted by mail, 84% were very confident their ballot counted as they intended.

Table 10: Voter Confidence Among Mail Voters by Presidential Choice (% by row)

Presidential Candidate Choice	Q4.2 - How confident are you that YOUR vote in the General Election was counted				
	Not at all confident	Not too confident	Somewhat confident	Very confident	Total N
Trump	17.19	12.33	30.97	39.52	2,265
Biden	.68	1.02	13.82	94.49	4,865
Total	32	49	672	4,110	7,130

Despite partisan attacks on mail voting and challenges election officials faced in meeting increased demand for mail ballots, mail voters typically rated their experience in a positive light. This uniformity of opinion among mail-voters did not generalize to voter confidence. The lack of confidence Trump mail-voters had that their mail ballot was counted accurately suggests these voters might seek another means of casting their ballot in future elections, especially if threats from the COVID-19 virus abate and attacks on the integrity of mail voting continue from Republican candidates.

The Future of Voting by Mail

Mail voters were asked if they would vote by mail in future elections based on their voting experience in 2020. Sixty-five percent of all persons who voted by mail in 2020 reported they would be very likely to vote by mail in future elections. Less than half (45%) of first-time mail voters reported that they would be very likely to vote by mail in future elections. Seventy-nine percent of voters who voted by mail in previous elections reported they would be very likely to vote again by mail.

The decision to vote by mail among first-time mail voters in 2020 was shaped by concern with contracting and spreading COVID-19. This was not a major reason for voting by mail in 2020 among persons who had voted by mail in previous elections. As the threat from COVID-19 abates, the demand for and incidence of mail voting could also decline.

Again, partisanship is a strong correlate of 2020 mail voters' intentions to vote by mail in future elections. Only 11% of Trump supporters who voted by mail for the first-time in 2020 reported they

would vote by mail in future elections. Even among Trump supporters who were experienced mail voters, only 62% said they would vote by mail in future elections. Among Biden supporters, 55% of first-time mail voters and 80% of previous mail voters reported they would be very likely to vote by mail in future elections.

Discussion

The future of mail-in voting is likely to be determined by a constellation of factors that are in tension with each other. Voters' fear from public health threats (e.g., COVID-19), partisan concerns with the integrity of mail voting, and state laws regulating this process have opposing and variable effects on voters' intention and ability to cast a mail ballot. All three conditions are subject to change in the near term. Moreover, how these factors interact to influence mail voting is unclear and should be the subject of future investigations. For these reasons, we have avoided offering a specific estimate of the proportion of votes that might be cast by mail in near term elections. Fear from public health threats would seem less likely to shape future mail voting, while partisan challenges to voting by mail and state laws regulating voting by mail remain salient influences on the incidence of mail voting.⁸

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Response to Postal Voting in the 2020 Election

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The research and report on “Postal Voting in the 2020 Election,” examines what drove voters to vote in record numbers using the mail ballot option in the 2020 election cycle. The authors look at the large increase in the use of mail voting during the 2020 election among all 50 states and seek to identify what motivated voters to make use of the mail ballot option during the COVID pandemic. Work along these lines will be very useful to election officials looking to determine whether the increase in mail voting will continue in future elections. Although the authors don’t make any “definitive” estimations on what can be expected in future elections, they make it clear that their work serves as a “suggestive” look at what mail voting might look like in the future based on the 2020 election cycle.

The work provides research on the history of mail ballot voting in the United States, as well as the increase of no excuse mail ballot access across the country due to COVID-19 in 2020. The study works to determine why it is that so many voters chose to vote by mail despite former President Donald Trump’s claim that mail ballot voting would result in election fraud in the 2020 election. The authors also identify those states that were open to providing more access and those who still restricted access to mail voting to only those who qualify, for different reasons. Their survey includes the following variables: age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, party preference, and mode of voting. They also verify the respondent’s mode of voting using past election history, rather than using a response from the survey participant. This distinction is important to accurately distinguish those who have used the mail ballot option in the past from those who were first time mail ballot voters.

This report should open a window of opportunity for election officials to look at what they can do to improve how voters feel about the use of mail ballot voting. Election officials can work in the following areas at the state and local level to increase confidence in mail ballot voting:

- Increase the use of risk limiting audits
- Educate voters on what is done to uphold the integrity of voting
- Provide comprehensive documentation on the mail ballot process for observers and voters
- Increase outreach to voters to educate them on the process

The future success of mail ballot voting in the United States will require all voters, parties, and political representatives to be confident that their votes are being counted and the process for counting them is reliable and adds integrity to the voting process.

Follow up work in this area will be crucial to allowing election officials to make use of the data from the first report. It may be of interest to determine what efforts are being made to educate voters about mail ballot voting security in the states where they survey voters in the future. For those first-time mail ballot voters who were unsure of the validity of their cast ballots in 2020, it will be important to see if education or legislative efforts, in states with respondents, have increased the number of voters who feel more comfortable with the ballot counting in their local jurisdictions.

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Response to Postal Voting in the 2020 Election

Alysoun McLaughlin, *Election Director, Montgomery County, Maryland*¹

This article discusses four questions about mail voting in the 2020 election:

- Who voted by mail in 2020 and why?
- Who switched to mail voting from another mode of voting in 2020 and why?
- What were the experiences of mail voters in the 2020 election?
- Who is likely to continue voting by mail in the future and why?

These questions are at the front of election administrators' thoughts after the dramatic shifts that we saw in voter behavior in the 2020 presidential election. How many voters will continue voting by mail? How many will return to voting in person? Election administrators have spent much of the past year considering these questions and making decisions, ranging from staffing levels for processing ballot applications to the number and placement of drop boxes, based on our expectations of voter behavior.

This article offers a reminder that election officials need not go it alone in our efforts at data-driven decision-making. There is an entire field of survey research focused on voters' experiences navigating the election process.

Examining the data at a national level, however, is of limited value to practitioners. It can provide some context for our own on-the-ground observations and voter feedback, and to some extent may allow us to compare our own voters' experiences with others across the country. There is such variation, however, in our laws and circumstances that any article describing nationwide data tends to raise more questions than it answers. For example, this article notes that 76% of voters who had previously voted by mail said that they would be very likely to do again, but only 48% of first-time mail voters said the same thing. Any election administrator looking at this data will quickly wonder, "Is that true in my jurisdiction? Is it true in this part of my county/that part of my city?"

Questions emerge quickly when you consider the answers to these questions in relation to administrative practices. "Will voters be more likely to cast their ballot by mail if there is a ballot drop box within a certain distance of their house/work/shopping location?" "Will PSAs influence voter turnout toward one voting method or another?"

The sample size of this survey suggests that we may be able to compare voters' responses at a jurisdictional level and ask such questions as:

- What answers did voters give to the survey questions in a particular jurisdiction?
- Are there any characteristics of a voting system, such as prepaid postage or the per capita number of drop boxes, that correlate to how voters rated their voting experience by mail?
- Were the partisan differences referenced in this article consistent across the country, or were there differences in this across the country, particularly where state and local government officials and other opinion leaders made statements that may have influenced voters' attitudes about voting by mail?

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