

UC Berkeley

Cal-in-Sac Undergraduate Research Products

Title

Policy Brief: Evaluating the Impact of Vote-By-Mail Policies in California

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1q0462wc>

Author

Williams, Fela

Publication Date

2023-11-08

Fela Williams

Cal-in-Sacramento

28 July 2023

Policy Brief: Evaluating the Impact of Vote-By-Mail Policies in California

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted widespread societal changes, including the expansion of vote-by-mail policies in 2020. With concern for the health and safety of the electorate, numerous states adopted more accessible mail-in ballot options, leading to an unprecedented surge in voter turnout nationwide during the November 2020 election. While this increase is often attributed to the expansion of vote-by-mail policies, its impact on marginalized groups with historically low rates of voter turnout remains understudied. Although voter turnout rates among minority groups increased in 2020, it is unclear if these were substantial changes that closed historical racial gaps in voter turnout. My research explores whether vote-by-mail policies have effectively closed turnout gaps, resulting in more representative electoral outcomes, or if voting by mail simply fosters greater overall participation.

Literature Review

Since 2020, there has been an influx of research on vote-by-mail policies, but the policy impact on voter turnout by race requires further analysis. Conducting research on race and voter turnout remains challenging, as data on race is not collected at the polls. Instead, most studies rely on survey results, which have limitations on data collection. For instance, much of the research on racial voter turnout is conducted nationwide, overlooking the unique stories, racial

demographics, and electoral policies of individual states. For example, studying California, with its automatic mail-in ballot policies, can provide insights into electoral policies and civic engagement that cannot be made from nationwide data.

Furthermore, existing voter turnout literature primarily focuses on turnout rates of the population overall or amongst subgroups, often neglecting the crucial analyses of voter turnout gaps. Exploring these gaps can provide insight into the costs of voting and barriers to civic engagement, prompting a shift in focus toward historically disadvantaged voters. Voter turnout is influenced by various social and political factors, such as limited transportation and political knowledge. However, vote-by-mail policies have shown promise in being an equitable solution to lower these barriers. My research explores whether vote-by-mail policies substantively help marginalized voters overcome these obstacles, effectively closing racial gaps in voter turnout.

Methodology

To assess the impact of vote-by-mail policies on voter turnout among minority groups, I calculated and analyzed changes in racial voter turnout gaps between the 2016 and 2020 Presidential Elections and the 2018 and 2022 Midterm Elections. If gaps closed in the 2020 Election and persisted in the 2022 Midterms (as midterms have lower rates of participation), that can be telling of whether or not vote-by-mail policies substantively increase turnout amongst marginalized groups. With the limitations on available data, the data from the US Census Bureau's Current Populations Surveys was the most consistent source for calculating these gaps across the four elections.

Findings

My research revealed no consistent pattern in changes in voter turnout gaps among the three racial groups studied, indicating that the current vote-by-mail policies do not have an overarching effect on substantively closing turnout gaps amongst all people of color. However, further investigation into the impact on specific racial groups is warranted.

Lack of Consistent Patterns

During the 2020 Election, the turnout gap decreased by 8.1% for Black voters but saw little change for Asian and Hispanic voters (refer to Table 2). Additionally, significant differences in changes in turnout gaps were observed dependent on the type of election. While Black voters notably closed the gap in the 2020 Election, the same did not occur in the 2022 Midterm Election, with the gap *increasing* by 8.6% from the previous midterm election (refer to Table 2). Vote-by-mail options might not have been enough to overcome other sociopolitical factors contributing to this change. Another notable finding is that disparities in changes in voter turnout gaps differed significantly when comparing state and nationwide data, particularly for Black and Asian voters in the Presidential Election. While data may support that vote-by-mail policies could have helped close the gap for Black voters, the same effect was not observed for Asian voters, who narrowed the gap by 0.5% at the state level and 5.1% at the nationwide level.

Overall Impact of Voting-by-Mail

The data does not provide substantial support for the notion that vote-by-mail policies significantly close racial voter turnout gaps. It may have helped Black voters narrow the gap in 2020, but at least across the board, there is support that it has helped increase turnout rates in general. Nonetheless, the policy was not sufficient enough to overcome the costs of voting in

midterm elections, aligning with the common trend of lower participation in less contentious elections (refer to Table 1).

Table 1: Changes in Voter Turnout Rates by Race

	2016 vs 2020 Presidential Elections		2018 vs 2022 Midterm Elections	
	Rate Changes in CA	Rate Changes Overall (US)	Rate Changes in CA	Rate Changes Overall (US)
White	+7.5%	+5.6%	+1.4%	+2.6%
Black	+15.6%	+3.2%	-7.2%	-6%
Asian	+8%	+10.7%	+1.6%	-0.4%
Hispanic	+7.4%	+6.1%	-1.2%	-2.5%

Table 2: Changes in Voter Turnout Gaps by Race

	2016 vs 2020 Presidential Elections		2018 vs 2022 Midterm Elections	
	Gap Changes in CA	Gap Changes Overall (US)	Gap Changes in CA	Gap Changes Overall (US)
Black/White non-Hispanic	-8.1%	+2.4%	+8.6%	+8.6%
Asian/White non-Hispanic	-0.5%	-5.1%	-0.2%	+3%
Hispanic/White non-Hispanic	+0.1%	-0.5%	+2.6%	+5.1%

Conclusion

In conclusion, these findings suggest that vote-by-mail policies have a positive impact on overall voter turnout and some racial groups during specific elections. However, current policies may not comprehensively close racial turnout gaps. Further research is needed to delve into the

nuances of voter turnout rates and gaps by race, as well as in the implementation of our current vote-by-mail policies, to determine if they are inclusive and accessible enough for all voters.

Ensuring that our elections genuinely represent the people requires discovering ways to assist minority voters in overcoming voting barriers.