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Are Voters Polarized Along Party Lines About How to Run Elections During the COVID-19 Crisis?

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Abstract. Are voters as polarized as political leaders when it comes to their preferences about how to cast their ballots in November 2020 and their policy positions on how elections should be run in light of the COVID-19 outbreak? Prior research has shown little party divide on voting by mail, with nearly equal percentages of voters in both parties choosing to vote this way where it is an option. Has a divide opened up this year in how voters aligned with the Democratic and Republican parties prefer to cast a ballot?

We address these questions by presenting the findings of an online survey of a nationally diverse sample of 5,612 eligible voters, fielded from April 8-10, with an embedded experiment providing treated respondents with scientific projections about the COVID-19 outbreak. We find an eight-percentage point difference between Democrats and Republicans in their preference for voting by mail in the control group, but this party divide doubles in the treatment group. We also find that exposure to scientific projections about the outbreak increases support for vote-by-mail legislation and confidence in vote-by-mail election integrity for both Democrats and Republicans.

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Introduction

Facing the common threat of the COVID-19 crisis, elected officials from the major parties have offered sharply divergent prescriptions about how to run November's election. Democratic Senators Klobuchar and Wyden have introduced legislation to expand access to voting through the mail and some states have proposed to run their primaries entirely through the mail (1). Republican leaders have spoken against the mandatory mail ballot approach (2); President Trump has tweeted that "Republicans should fight very hard when it comes to state-wide mail-in voting. Democrats are clamoring for it. Tremendous potential for voter fraud, and for whatever reason, doesn't work out well for Republicans." (3)

Among voters, prior research has shown little party divide on voting by mail, with nearly equal percentages of voters in both parties choosing to vote this way in past studies (4, 5). Has a divide emerged this year in how voters aligned with the Democratic and Republican parties want to cast a ballot? What determines public opinions about confidence in the integrity of elections results and policies moving toward voting by mail?

To provide data that informs these conversations, we report how a sample of the nation's eligible voters want to see November's election run. We present the results of an online survey fielded on April 8-10 asking a nationally diverse sample of 5,612 eligible American voters for their views on how they would like to vote – in person or through mail ballots? -- in November and their preferences about proposed changes in election policies. We embed a randomized experiment in this survey presenting respondents with truthful summaries of the projections of two teams of scientists about the COVID-19 outbreak (6, 7): one predicting a peak in the spring and the other in the fall.

We pre-registered four hypotheses. First, we predicted that, in the control condition, there will be partisan divides on support for mandatory vote-by-mail legislation (H1) as well as confidence in election integrity when elections are held by mail (H2). In line with previous research, we expected no partisan gap in personal preference over how to cast a ballot (H3). Finally, because recent work has shown that Republicans are less concerned with COVID-19 and less trusting of scientific efforts, the impact of expert COVID-19 projections in the treatment conditions should be attenuated for Republicans (H4). Our results find support for the first two hypotheses, partial support for the fourth hypothesis, but evidence, against H3, that a partisan divide is now emerging over how to cast ballots.

Results

Results from three models testing for partisan differences are displayed in Figure 1. These results are from weighted OLS regressions where respondents from the nationally diverse sample are weighted to match the sample frame of the national citizen, voting age population and the p-values are from one-tailed hypothesis tests based on the pre-registered hypotheses. Treatment conditions are pooled; all treated respondents read one of the scientific projections about COVID-19.

Column (1) shows the support for national legislation requiring vote-by-mail for the November election among those offering an opinion. The constant indicates that, without being presented with COVID-19 projections, 68% of Democrats support such a policy. This

is substantively and statistically significantly higher than Republicans; only 44.6% of Republicans offering an opinion support national legislation requiring vote-by-mail.

This pattern is mirrored in Columns (2) and (3), which show that Democrats are significantly more likely than Republicans to want to cast their own ballot by mail and significantly more likely to believe that voting-by-mail is the best way to ensure the integrity of the election. In the control condition, 39% of Democrats indicated that they would like to vote by mail in November while only 31% of Republicans indicated this. This gap is even larger when respondents are asked what type of voting methods gives them the greatest confidence in the integrity of the election; in the control condition 29% of Democrats chose vote-by-mail as the best method of voting while only 18% of Republicans chose it.

Turning to the experiment, the treatment moved Democratic respondents towards favoring vote-by-mail for the November election on all three survey questions. Reading scientific projections of when COVID-19 cases are likely to peak increased Democrats' preference to vote by mail by 9 percentage points. Republicans showed a different pattern as the treatment effect on the respondent's preferred method to cast a ballot was significantly lower (and indistinguishable from 0).

Figure 2 provides predicted probability plots showing the likelihood of supporting vote-by-mail legislation and choosing vote-by-mail as one's preferred method of voting across conditions and partisanship. This figure highlights that scientific projections related to COVID-19 widen the partisan divide in vote-by-mail preferences; when provided with scientific projections related to COVID-19, the gap in preferred voting method between the parties goes from more than eight percentage points in the control to nearly sixteen percentage points in the treatment groups.

Discussion

These results shed light on how COVID-19, as well as statements by today's political leaders, might alter previous findings related to vote-by-mail preferences. While previous work showed no partisan gap related to voting by mail in American elections (4), our results suggest that the current political climate and COVID-19 have the potential to create one.

Confirming our hypothesis, we found significant partisan differences in support for mandatory vote-by-mail legislation; a strong majority of Democrats support such a proposal while Republicans are split with a narrow majority opposing it. Similarly, Republicans are less likely to believe that vote-by-mail is the best way to ensure the integrity of the November election. Unlike our expectations, we also found a significant difference in partisan preference to personally vote by mail; nearly a third of Republicans do prefer this option for November's election, but Democrats (as well as independents) are significantly more likely to want to cast their ballot without visiting a polling place. The difference in preferences between eligible voters in the two major parties is eight percentage points in our control condition, with our research design not allowing us to isolate the cause of this difference.

The experimental results suggest that exposure to information about the peak of the COVID-19 outbreak exacerbates some of these gaps, with Democrats becoming

significantly more likely to want to cast their ballot by mail while the same information did not move Republican preferences. The random assignment of respondents into our treatment groups allows us to isolate exposure to the scientific projections as the cause of this larger observed partisan gap. This finding matches existing research on the partisan divide in trust in experts (8); Republicans are less willing to trust expert advice than Democrats. If the COVID-19 outbreak persists, this might contribute to a widening divide in partisan preferences on how to cast a ballot. Whether the expressed preferences for a voting method result in actual partisan differences in voting behavior will be revealed in November, 2020.

Materials and Methods

The survey was fielded from April 8-10, 2020 using Luc.Id's Fulcrum platform. This platform has previously been demonstrated to provide nationally diverse samples that exhibit similar treatment effects to samples from other sources (9). The sample frame was American citizens of voting age. The total sample included 5,612 respondents. Partisanship was measured using a 7-point scale that ranges from "Strongly Democrat" to "Strongly Republican" and both those who identified with one of the two major parties or indicated they leaned towards one were included as partisans. The treatments were:

- 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./ 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.]

This study was reviewed by the institutional review board at [BLANK] and deemed exempt as it met the criteria for minimal risk and participants were debriefed at the end. Informed consent was collected before respondents answered any questions. The method and hypotheses were pre-registered at EGAP.org [BLANK]. Data and associated protocol will be available on the Dataverse and are also described in [BLANK].

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	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Support for mandatory mail ballot voting	Personal preference is to vote by mail	Mail ballots provide most confidence in integrity of results
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Treatment (Exposure to scientific projections)	0.039* (0.023)	0.088** (0.020)	0.046** (0.019)
Treatment X Independent	0.057 (0.047)	0.063 (0.040)	-0.021 (0.036)
Treatment X Republican	-0.013 (0.033)	-0.070** (0.030)	-0.016 (0.027)
Independent	-0.302** (0.038)	-0.044 (0.032)	0.037 (0.029)
Republican	-0.238** (0.026)	-0.087** (0.024)	-0.112** (0.022)
Constant	0.684** (0.018)	0.393** (0.016)	0.288** (0.015)
Observations	4,369	5,612	5,612
R ²	0.066	0.024	0.022
Adjusted R ²	0.064	0.023	0.021

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01
P-values based on one-tailed tests

Figure 1. Results from weighted OLS regressions of support for mandatory vote-by-mail legislation and vote-by-mail balloting on treatment, partisanship, and their interaction.

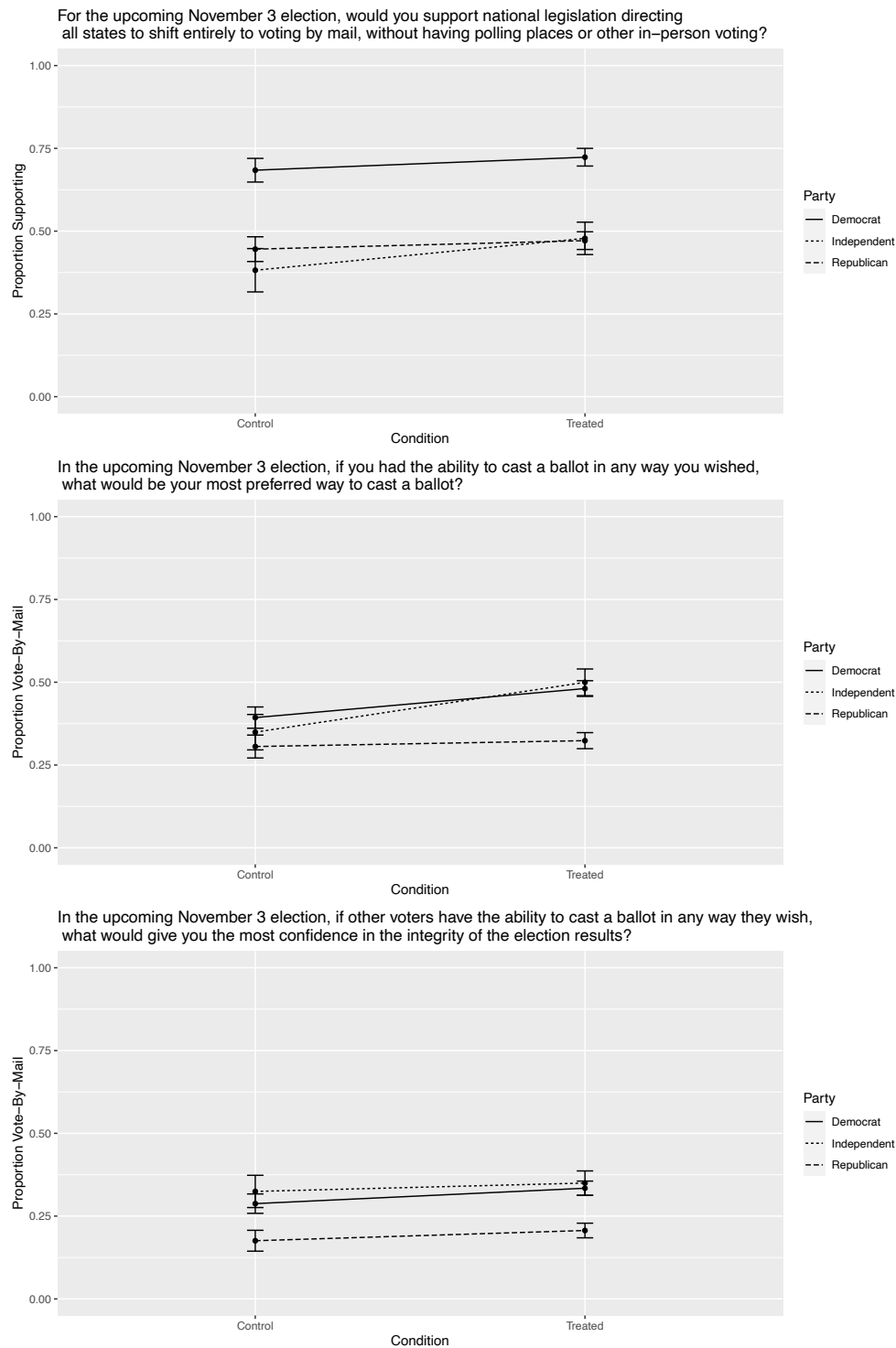


Figure 2. Predicted probabilities for supporting vote-by-mail or preferring to vote by mail by party and treatment condition.