

New Electorate Study

Is there a Partisan Divide over Voting by Mail in California's November 2020 Election?

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RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Governor Gavin Newsom issued a May 8th executive order requiring all county registrars to send a mail ballot to all registered for November 2020 general election. By analyzing a statewide survey of a diverse sample of 12,276 eligible voters conducted April 8-22, 2020, we ask:

1. Is there a partisan divide between eligible voters from California's major parties over whether they prefer to vote in person or through mail ballots this November, and what percentage of likely voters from each party say they will not vote if the election is held exclusively through the mail?
2. Do the parties divide when it comes to policy proposals about how to conduct this election?

KEY FINDINGS

- When we asked eligible voters how they wanted to cast their ballots this November, we found no significant divide between the parties. More than half of eligible voters in both parties prefer to cast a ballot by mail, with nearly another two in ten voters preferring to drop off a ballot that has been automatically sent to them in the mail.
- A move to conducting elections entirely through mail ballot voting in California would be unlikely to tilt the balance in favor of either major party, with nearly identical percentages of Democrats (2.8%) and Republicans (2.7%) saying that they would not participate in this type of election.
- Gaps of eight to twelve percentage points emerge between the parties over support for policies that move toward voting by mail, though there is still a strong consensus supporting these changes among all partisan groups.

BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH APPROACH

In national politics, a clear divide has emerged between leaders of America's two major parties about whether to shift toward mail ballot voting in order to hold a presidential election during the COVID-19 crisis. Democratic senators have introduced [federal legislation](#) to expand access to voting through the mail, while Republican leaders have [spoken against this approach](#). President Trump has [tweeted](#) that "Republicans should fight very hard when it comes to state-wide mail-in voting. Democrats are clamoring for it...for whatever reason, doesn't work out well for Republicans."

Are California's eligible voters as polarized as national political leaders when it comes to voting by mail during the current public health crisis? [Research](#) on prior elections in California and in other states that have shifted toward mail ballot voting on a county-by-county basis has shown little party divide on voting by mail, with these transitions having no impact on each party's turnout or vote share. Has a divide opened up this year in how voters aligned with the Democratic and Republican parties prefer to cast their ballots and in their views of election policies?

We address these questions through a major public opinion survey of California's eligible electorate conducted April 8-22, during the COVID-19 crisis but before the Governor's executive order shifted California's election toward voting by mail. We conducted our survey online, recruiting a sample of 12,276 respondents 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's citizen voting age population. In another New Electorate Project Research Brief [here](#), we provide a more comprehensive report on our full set of results, including breakdowns of how members of the state's largest racial and ethnic groups view the elections.

In this study, we focus on potential partisan divides. We measure partisanship 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. Those who did not lean either way we label as independents.

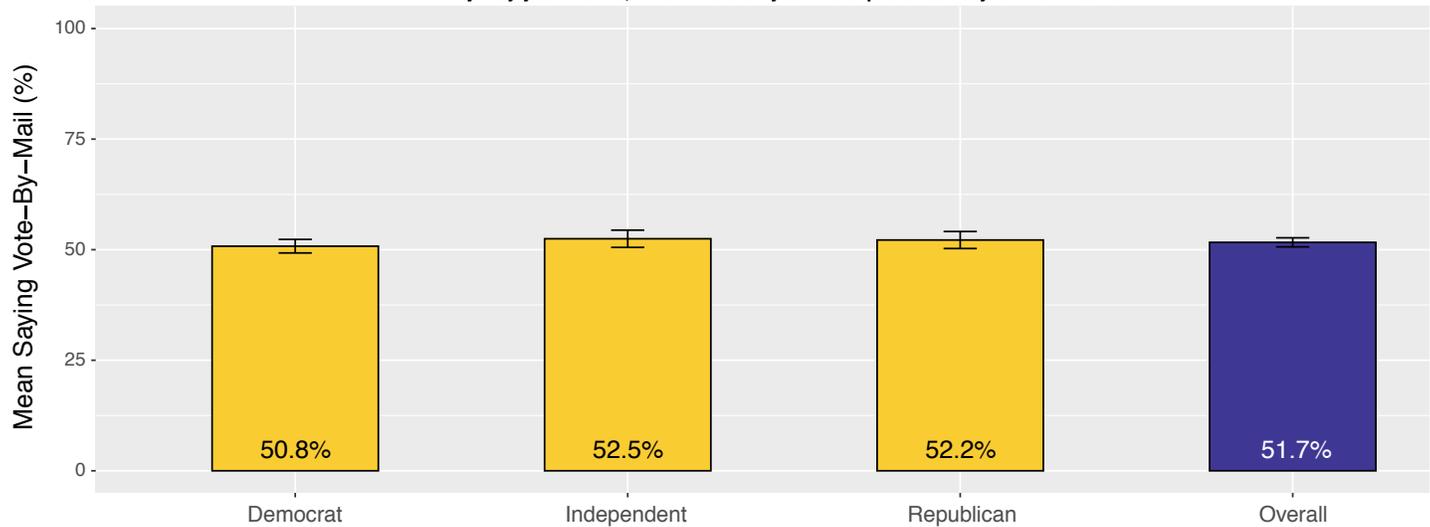
IS THERE A PARTISAN DIVIDE OVER HOW CALIFORNIANS WANT TO CAST THEIR OWN BALLOTS?

Figure 1 shows how Democratic, independent, and Republican eligible voters, as well as eligible voters overall, would prefer to cast their ballots in November's election. We asked whether they would like to vote in a traditional polling place (an option offered in the March primary in most counties), at a vote center (where voters in the 15 counties adopting the Voter's Choice Act in March could vote in person), by mailing in their ballot, or by dropping off a ballot that has been mailed to them at a vote center or secure drop box.

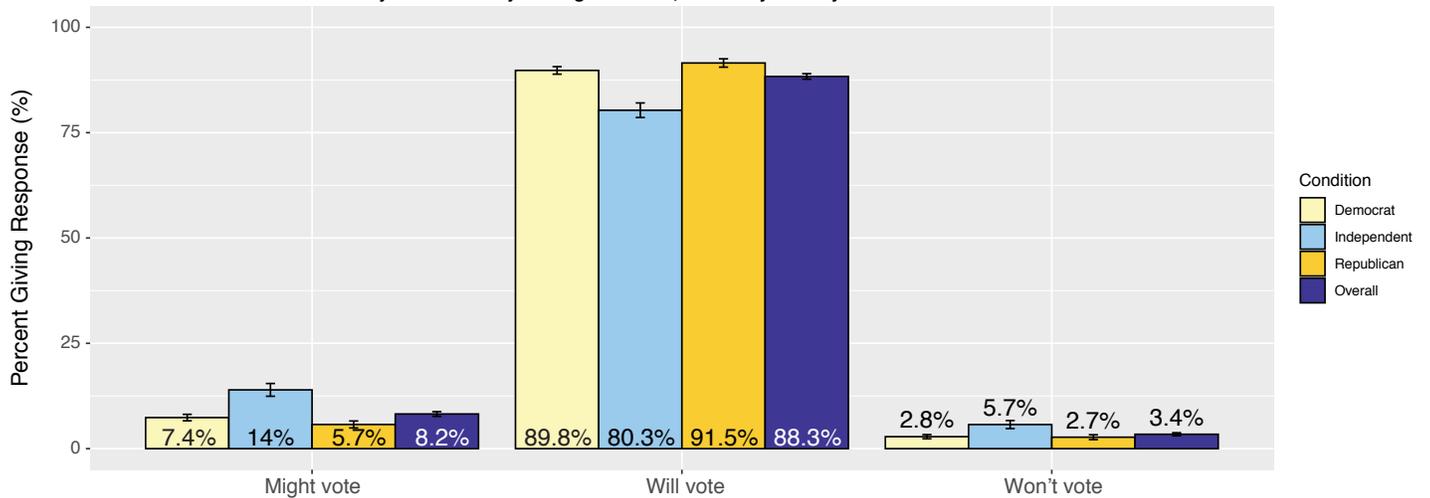
Overall, 51.7% of respondents said that they would prefer to vote by mailing in their ballot. Another 18.9% selected the option of dropping off a ballot that had been automatically mailed to them a month before election day. Combining these two figures, a total of 70.6% of voters overall preferred to cast a ballot that has been sent 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](#). By contrast, 29.4% selected one of the in-person options. Clearly, the COVID-19 crisis has led Californians, who have always voted by mail at a relatively high rate, to embrace this option even more strongly.

Figure 1. Personal Preferences on How to Cast a Ballot, by Party

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 to vote by mailing in a ballot, how likely would you be to cast a ballot?



But have members of both parties made this shift together, or is there a large red versus blue divide in the embrace of voting by mail? Our party breakdowns demonstrate that no significant gap exists across partisan groups in California in preferences for mailing in a ballot. This option is the most preferred method of voting this November for each group and is favored by 50.8% of Democrats in our survey, 52.5% of independents, and by 52.2% of Republicans.

Would a policy that shifts away from in-person voting options toward a focus on voting by mail translate into differential turnout rates across partisan groups? To explore this question, we also asked respondents whether they were likely to participate in November if casting a mail ballot was their only option. To report responses to this question, 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. Overall, 3.4% responded that they “won’t vote” if a mail ballot was their only option. Importantly, there was no gap between respondents in the major parties on these voting plans: 2.7% of Republicans and 2.8% of Democrats said that they likely would not participate in a mail ballot only election, while 5.7% of independents gave this response.

First, these findings suggest that moving to a vote-by-mail election in California this November is unlikely to tip the balance toward either major party. Second, they highlight the fact that some eligible voters in both parties, and an even larger number of independents, could be discouraged from voting by this policy. Given California’s large voter population, with 25.3 million

eligible voters and 20.7 million registered voters [statewide](#), these small percentages translate to hundreds of thousands of eligible voters who could be left out of the election. It will be important for state and local elections officials to conduct a major outreach effort designed to connect with those who prefer in-person voting options in order to keep them in California's active electorate.

IS THERE A PARTISAN DIVIDE OVER THE ELECTION POLICIES THAT CALIFORNIANS SUPPORT?

In Figure 2, we report how our survey respondents viewed 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. There is a strong consensus in favor of no-excuse absentee voting among Californians, with 83.2% overall 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.). Democrats in California are nearly eight percentage points more strongly supportive than Republicans of this option. More than eight in ten respondents in both major parties favor it.

Overall, 72.3% of respondents taking a position favored a national law that would require states to send a mail ballot to every registered voter. This is one aspect of Gov. Newsom's executive order, and California counties that have adopted the Voter's Choice Act do this (with the exception of Los Angeles County, which had been exempted from the requirement to mail out ballots automatically until 2024 but which will mail them out this November under the executive order). On this policy, a stronger partisan divide emerges: 79.9% of Democrats and 68.2% of Republicans support it.

Finally, we asked whether eligible voters supported national legislation that would move the November 2020 election entirely to voting by mail, without having polling places or other in-person voting. This represents a major policy shift toward voting by mail. In the context of this year's election, there was strong support for this proposal among eligible California voters overall (66.8%). It is important to note that the remaining 33.2% of eligible voters opposed such a policy, demonstrating that significant demand for in-person voting options remain. Perhaps surprisingly, this was the policy for which the gap between the two major parties was narrowest. For Democrats, 73.2% supported the proposal, but so did 65.5% of Republicans. Support for this proposal among independents was weakest at 56.8%, further indicating that connecting to voters who are not tied to either major party should be a strong priority for elections officials working to ensure that all eligible voters have the opportunity to participate as California implements a major transition in the way ballots are cast.

About the New Electorate Project:

This project aims to provide rigorous evidence to evaluate how recent voting reforms in California are reshaping the state's electorate. In a series of studies, we ask how these reforms – including the Voter's Choice Act, the statewide move toward voting by mail in November 2020, shifts in the timing of local elections, and changes in voter registration – impact both overall turnout rates and the extent to which California's new electorate reflects and represents emerging demographic trends. We are conducting original academic research, but also summarizing our findings in research briefs tailored to policymakers, advocates, journalists, and interested members of the public. Our findings will be released to the public and available at newelectorateproject.org.

Funded by the University of California's Office of the President, this project brings together faculty members, graduate students and undergraduates at five UC campuses with collaborators at USC and the PPIC, along with two former lawmakers who now teach at UC San Diego. The project leaders are:

UC San Diego: Thad Kousser, Seth Hill, Denise Ducheny, Nathan Fletcher

UC Davis: Ben Highton, Cheryl Boudreau

UC Berkeley: Jack Citrin, Gabe Lenz

UC Riverside: Jenn Merolla, Dan Biggers

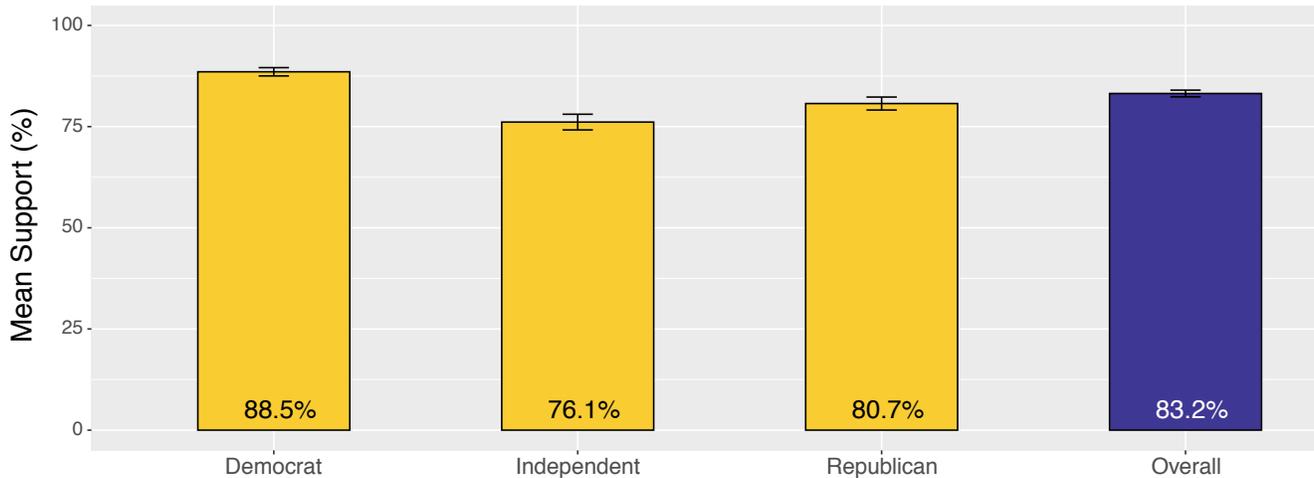
UC Merced: Jessica Trounstein

University of Southern California: Mindy Romero

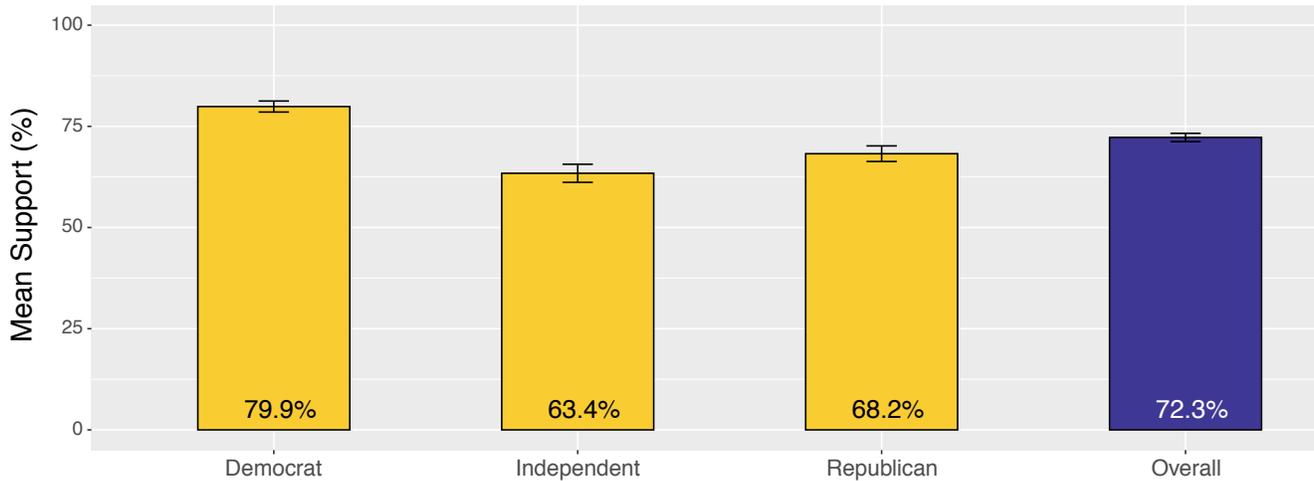
Public Policy Institute of California: Eric McGhee

Figure 2. Policy Views on Voting by Mail, by Party

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?

