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Voter Messaging in the Time of COVID-19 Survey Fact Sheet

CENTER FOR INCLUSIVE DEMOCRACY

The Center for Inclusive Democracy (CID), formerly the California Civic Engagement Project, at the University of Southern California Price School of Public Policy conducted a statewide representative survey examining the opinions of eligible voters (adult citizens) in California and the likelihood of their electoral participation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Understanding Californians' voting preferences given the public health threat of the COVID-19 virus is essential to creating effective public education strategies. The results of the study, conducted in partnership with the Future of California Elections (FoCE), will be used to develop and launch educational resources to help guide election officials and non-profit organizations on the best practices in conveying current and up-to-date information to voters.
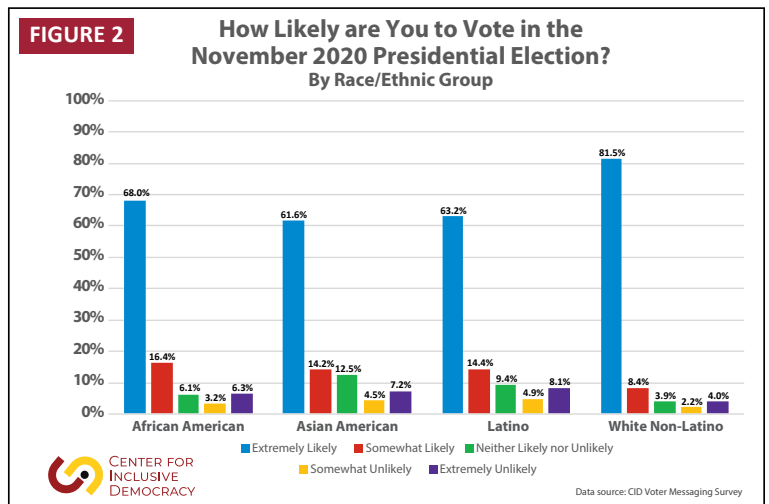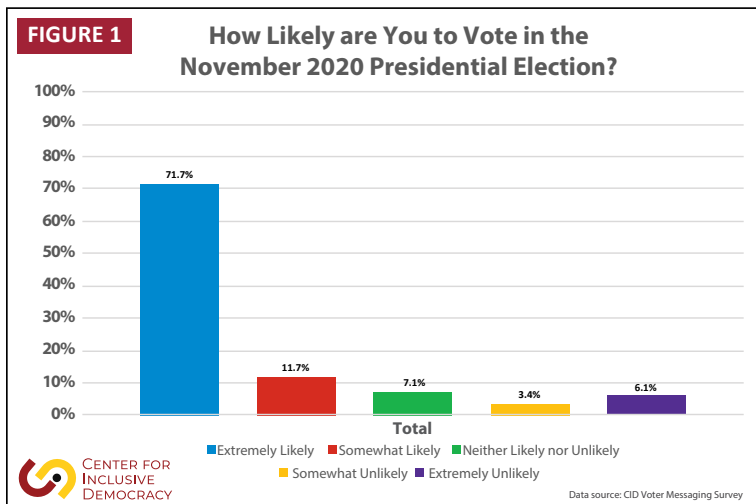
We surveyed a large sample of eligible voters – 11,913 respondents – in order to include oversamples of members of the state's largest racial and ethnic groups. Surveys were conducted in both English and Spanish. The margin of error for the total survey sample is +/-2.7%. This fact sheet presents our findings from the voter messaging component of the survey. A full discussion of the study's findings, including eligible voters' concerns on voting this November, their preferences on how and when to vote, and their trusted information sources will be available in a upcoming CID report.

What Types of Messaging Impact the Likelihood of Voting?

We randomly divided the survey's respondents into seven groups: one group received no message of any kind, another received a core message about available options for casting ballots in the upcoming election, while the remaining five each received this core message plus an added message we were seeking to test. The group that received no message is our control group, while the other six groups explore different experimental treatments.

Survey Control Group

Figure 1 presents the reported likelihood of voting in the November 2020 General Election for control group respondents, while Figure 2 shows the variation in the likelihood of voting for this group broken down by race and ethnicity. It is common in public opinion surveys for respondents to be highly optimistic about their chances of voting, and the respondents to our survey are no exception. What matters for our analysis is whether respondents are more or less confident when receiving our experimental messages.


FIGURE 1 — How Likely are You to Vote in the November 2020 Presidential Election?

Total: Extremely Likely 71.7%, Somewhat Likely 11.7%, Neither Likely nor Unlikely 7.1%, Somewhat Unlikely 3.4%, Extremely Unlikely 6.1%

Data source: CID Voter Messaging Survey

FIGURE 2 — How Likely are You to Vote in the November 2020 Presidential Election? By Race/Ethnic Group

African American: Extremely Likely 68.0%, Somewhat Likely 16.4%, Neither Likely nor Unlikely 6.1%, Somewhat Unlikely 3.2%, Extremely Unlikely 6.3%
Asian American: Extremely Likely 61.6%, Somewhat Likely 14.2%, Neither Likely nor Unlikely 12.5%, Somewhat Unlikely 4.5%, Extremely Unlikely 7.2%
Latino: Extremely Likely 63.2%, Somewhat Likely 14.4%, Neither Likely nor Unlikely 9.4%, Somewhat Unlikely 4.9%, Extremely Unlikely 8.1%
White Non-Latino: Extremely Likely 81.5%, Somewhat Likely 8.4%, Neither Likely nor Unlikely 3.9%, Somewhat Unlikely 2.2%, Extremely Unlikely 4.0%

Data source: CID Voter Messaging Survey

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Voting Options Message

We tested a voter message focused on explaining a voter's options for casting their ballot in November. The "voting options" message was also used as the core component of five additional messages we tested, all with a uniquely added component presented to voters: safety, trusted messenger, trusted messenger with safety message, community empowerment, and a reduction of the voting options to focus only on vote-by-mail. See appendix for the text of all six tested messages.

Voting is easier than ever before. You choose how and when to vote. Every registered voter in California will automatically get a ballot in the mail, even if they did not request one. You have three options to return your ballot. You can return it by mail, drop it off at a ballot drop-box or a voting location near you. You can also vote in-person at a voting location starting the weekend before Election Day and through Election Day.

Figure 3 presents the differences in the likelihood of voting for each group of respondents randomly chosen to view one of the six voting messages compared to the control group that did not receive a message.
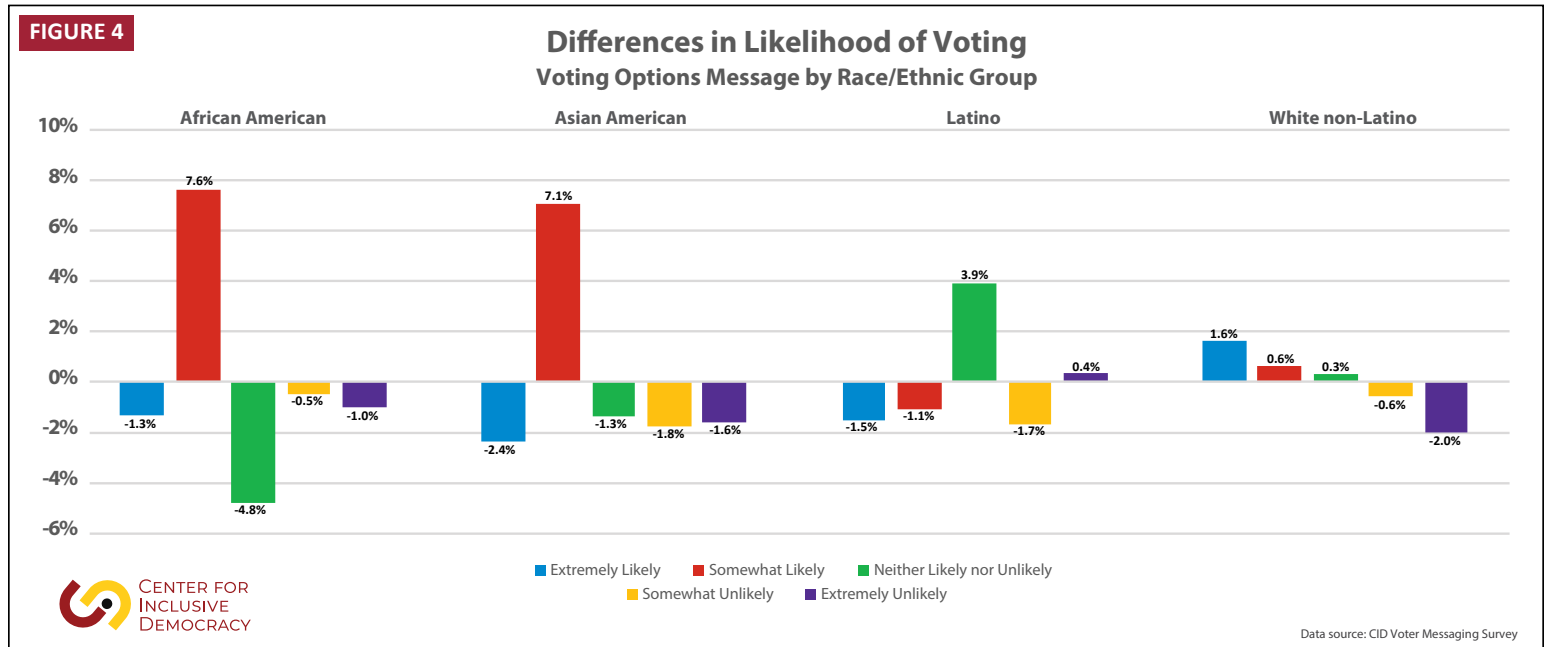

FIGURE 3

Differences in Likelihood of Voting
by Type of Voter Message

Data source: CID Voter Messaging Survey
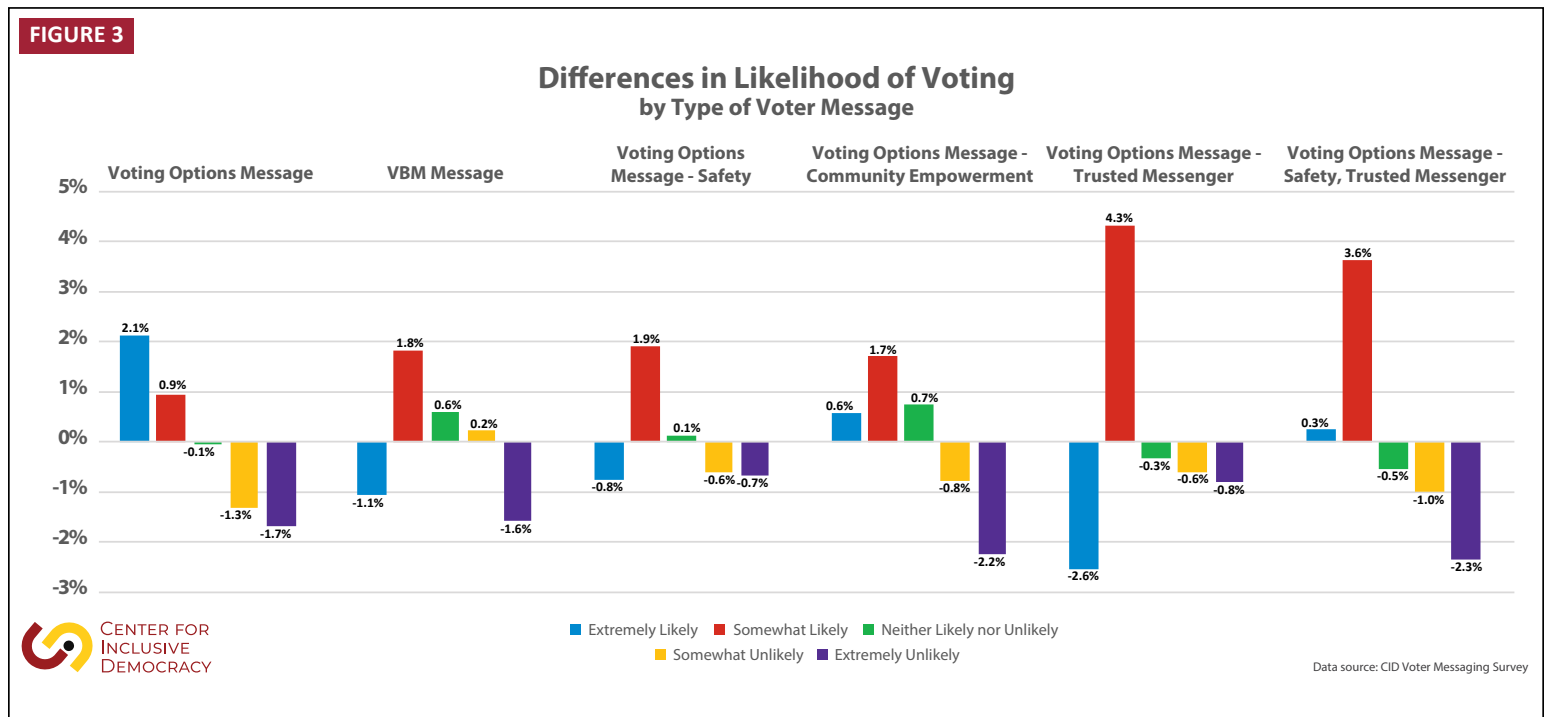
The percentage of respondents receiving the core "voting options" message who indicated they are extremely likely to vote was higher by two percentage points than the control group. The percentage reporting they are somewhat likely to vote was higher than the control group by one percentage point.

For respondents receiving the "voting options" message with added health and safety language, those extremely likely to vote was lower by about a percentage point than the control group. The percentage reporting they are somewhat likely to vote was higher than the control group by almost two percentage points. However, when respondents received a "voting options" message with a safety emphasis that was delivered by California civil rights organizations (a trusted messenger for many eligible voters) the percentage of this group indicating they are somewhat likely to vote was higher by 3.6 percentage points over the control group.

A "voting options" message with the addition of community empowerment language also produced a positive effect on the likelihood of voting for voters receiving this message – 0.6 and 1.7 percentage points higher for extremely likely and somewhat likely to vote, respectively, than the control group.

Receiving a voting message limited to focusing only on vote-by-mail options also generated a split impact on the likelihood of voting - 1.1 percentage points lower for extremely likely and 1.8 percentage points higher for somewhat likely to vote, respectively, than the control group.

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Figure 4 breaks out the effect of the core "voting options" message on the likelihood of voting for racial and ethnic groups in California. Both African Americans and Asian Americans who received this message said they are somewhat likely to vote by more than 7 percentage points than the control group although their reported extreme likelihood of voting is lower. In contrast, the effect of the voting options message was much smaller (in a positive or negative direction) for both Latinos and white, non-Latinos.

FIGURE 4

Differences in Likelihood of Voting
Voting Options Message by Race/Ethnic Group

African American — Extremely Likely -1.3%, Somewhat Likely 7.6%, Neither Likely nor Unlikely -4.8%, Somewhat Unlikely -0.5%, Extremely Unlikely -1.0%

Asian American — Extremely Likely -2.4%, Somewhat Likely 7.1%, Neither Likely nor Unlikely -1.3%, Somewhat Unlikely -1.8%, Extremely Unlikely -1.6%

Latino — Extremely Likely -1.5%, Somewhat Likely -1.1%, Neither Likely nor Unlikely 3.9%, Somewhat Unlikely -1.7%, Extremely Unlikely 0.4%

White non-Latino — Extremely Likely 1.6%, Somewhat Likely 0.6%, Neither Likely nor Unlikely 0.3%, Somewhat Unlikely -0.6%, Extremely Unlikely -2.0%

Legend: ■ Extremely Likely ■ Somewhat Likely ■ Neither Likely nor Unlikely ■ Somewhat Unlikely ■ Extremely Unlikely

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Data source: CID Voter Messaging Survey

Conclusion

Of the six messages the survey tested, those with the largest effect on the likelihood of voting are the core voting options message and the version that is accompanied by community empowerment language. The voting options message with added health and safety language did not have as large a positive impact on the likelihood of voting as these other messages. However, the effect of the health and safety message was greater when delivered by a trusted messenger.

Acknowledgments

We thank Astrid Ochoa, Executive Director of the Future of California Elections, for her partnership on all aspects of this study. We also thank Eric McGhee, Ph.D., for his contributions to the survey design and analysis, as well as his careful review of the contents of this fact sheet. A thank you to Jason Mendez at Snapshot Media for his graphic design services.

This research is supported through funding from the Democracy Fund.

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About the Center for Inclusive Democracy (CID)

The Center for Inclusive Democracy (CID), formerly known as the California Civic Engagement Project, is part of the USC Sol Price School of Public Policy and is based in Sacramento. CID conducts a range of national and multi-state research initiatives exploring voting behavior, civic engagement, electoral and economic research, the intersection of social justice and democracy, and more. Its research informs and empowers a wide range of policy and organizing efforts aimed at eliminating disparities in social and economic well-being. Now a cornerstone project nested within CID's larger umbrella, the California Civic Engagement Project continues to produce groundbreaking resources and research for California.

For more information about this research, contact Mindy Romero, CID Director, at msromero@usc.edu.

Appendix

Survey Methodology

We fielded the survey of 11,913 respondents from July 22-29, recording the views of a diverse sample in which 44.5% of respondents are white, non-Latino, 30.9% are Latino, 14.5% are Asian-American, and 7.2% are African-American. Each of these figures are within 1 percentage point of the estimates for the state's citizen voting-age population reported by the California Department of Finance. 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.

Voting Messages

1. Voting Options Message
Voting is easier than ever before. You choose how and when to vote. Every registered voter in California will automatically get a ballot in the mail, even if they did not request one. You have three options to return your ballot. You can return it by mail, drop it off at a ballot drop-box or a voting location near you. You can also vote in-person at a voting location starting the weekend before Election Day and through Election Day.

2. Voting Options Message – with Safety
Vote Safe California. Voting is safer than ever before. You choose how and when to vote. Every registered voter in California will automatically get a ballot in the mail, even if they did not request one. You have three options to return your ballot. You can return it by mail, drop it off at a ballot drop box or a voting location near you. Voters who can vote-by-mail will help ensure safe physical distancing at voting locations. You can also vote in person at a voting location starting the weekend before Election Day and through Election Day. Social distancing and health measures will be in place at voting locations.

3. Voting Options Message – with Community Empowerment
Voting is easier than ever before. You choose how and when to vote. Every registered voter in California will automatically get a ballot in the mail, even if they did not request one. You have three options to return your ballot. You can return it by mail, drop it off at a ballot drop box or a voting location near you. You can also vote in-person at a voting location starting the weekend before Election Day and through Election Day. The future is ours to build by voting together. We have work to do. The first step is to vote. We must vote for our families. Vote for our communities. Vote for our future.

4. Voting Options Message by Trusted Messenger
A message from California civil rights organizations:
Voting is easier than ever before. You choose how and when to vote. Every registered voter in California will automatically get a ballot in the mail, even if they did not request one. You have three options to return your ballot. You can return it by mail, drop it off at a ballot drop box or a voting location near you. You can also vote in-person at a voting location starting the weekend before Election Day and through Election Day.

5. Voting Options Message - with Safety by Trusted Messenger
A message from California civil rights organizations:
In order to protect each person's right to vote and offer safe and secure ways to vote, every registered voter in California will automatically get a ballot in the mail, even if they did not request one. You have three options to return your ballot. You can return it by mail, drop it off at a ballot drop box or a voting location near you. You can also safely vote in-person at a voting location starting the weekend before Election Day and through Election Day.

6. Voting Options Message – VBM Only
Voting is easier than ever before. Every registered voter in the state will get a ballot in the mail, even if they did not request one. You have three options to return your ballot. You can return it by mail, drop it off at a ballot drop box or a voting location near you through 8pm on Election Day.