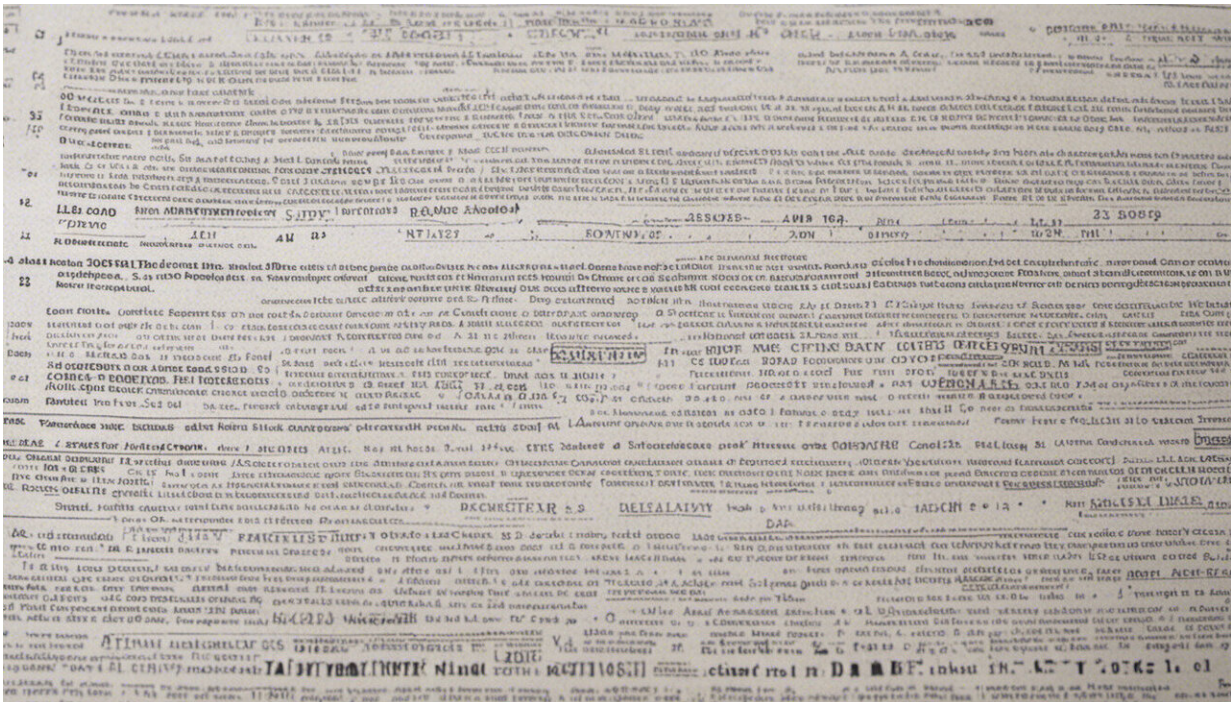


Does voting by mail increase the risk of voter fraud?

July 7 2020



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

We are living in the midst of a global pandemic. And there is a bitter partisan debate unfolding on whether more Americans should cast their votes through the mail during a time when going out may be hazardous to peoples' health.

The debate is provoking online disinformation and conspiracy theories that could undermine trust in the results, even if there are no major problems. Simultaneously, Donald Trump's reelection campaign and the Republican National Committee have filed lawsuits to stop [vote](#)-by-mail legislation in places like California and Pennsylvania.

For University of Chicago political scientist Anthony Fowler, an expert on elections and [voter turnout](#), the current controversy offers a chance to examine the benefits and drawbacks of voting by mail. An associate professor at the Harris School of Public Policy, Fowler discusses existing research on mail voting—and reveals how he plans to vote in November.

What can be done to ensure trust in the upcoming elections?

That's a tough question. On one hand, we shouldn't be complacent about fraud or the integrity of our elections. But on the other hand, we shouldn't let unfounded fears prevent us from administering a fairer and more representative election. Election officials should do everything they can to detect and mitigate potential fraud while also educating the public about these efforts and about the typically low levels of fraud in our elections.

What has your research shown on participation and trust of the electorate in vote-by-mail elections?

Some of the research I've done suggests that the American public doesn't like mail voting. In surveys, for example, people say they don't trust the results of mail elections and they are less likely to vote if that's their only option.

But research also shows that when mail voting is implemented, it appears

to actually increase participation. One interpretation is that people overestimate how burdensome voting by mail will be, but once they do it, they like it and they keep doing it. Another benefit of vote-by-mail is that you can cast your ballot in the comfort of your own home, and you can take the time to learn about all the offices and candidates, meaning that you might actually cast a more informed vote than you would at a polling place.

If this is right, and there is some research to support it, it means that even if mail voting doesn't meaningfully change the composition of the voting population, it could improve electoral selection and accountability, and most voters should be happy about that.

Could there be more fraud in an election that is almost entirely vote-by-mail?

Vote by mail does introduce new risks. In theory, it could be easier for someone to fraudulently vote on behalf of someone else or for someone to tamper with the ballots in a vote-by-mail system.

Furthermore, one might be more concerned about coercion or vote buying with mail ballots. A political operative can't join you at the polling place and verify that you voted for a particular candidate, but they could come to your home, pressure you to vote a particular way, and watch you fill out your ballot and drop it in the mail.

In practice, however, voter fraud is very rare, and the risk of widespread fraud is probably very minimal, even with all-mail elections. But nevertheless, as more voters cast their ballots through the mail, we should think about these issues and do what we can, within reason, to identify and mitigate fraud or coercion.

Several recent studies have come out showing increased participation in elections and neutral partisan effects when voters can vote-by-mail. What are your thoughts on these studies as we turn our sights to the upcoming presidential election in November?

One good study we discussed in detail in a recent episode of Not Another Politics Podcast. The authors are using a compelling design and the best available data to assess the effect of all-mail elections on turnout. They find that mail voting increases participation by a few percentage points and does not meaningfully benefit one party over the other.

Another study, which you can find [here](#), is an example of why it can be dangerous to rush studies to the press before they've been carefully vetted. They claim to find that mail elections increased participation in Colorado by nine percentage points.

This estimate is much larger than any other study of which I am aware on vote-by-mail, and I suspect it's not very reliable. One concern is that the standard errors are unreliable, and the authors are using a statistical approach that is virtually guaranteed to give them a statistically significant estimate even if the effect of mail voting is zero.

Another concern is that the authors are using current voter files rather than aggregate turnout counts to estimate the effect of vote-by-mail. One problem with this is that eligible but non-registered people aren't included in the analysis and to the extent that vote-by-mail affects registration, this will bias the estimates. Another problem is that people who were registered might later be removed from the rolls because they

didn't vote in several recent elections, which could also induce biases.

When I and others have tried to replicate this result using aggregate vote counts, the estimated effect of vote-by-mail is much smaller. There is only so much we can learn from Colorado about vote-by-mail because it's just one state and the entire state adopted all-mail elections at once, so any estimates are going to be highly uncertain. But when we look at more, better evidence, we learn that mail elections do increase turnout but only by a few percentage points.

Will an all vote-by-mail election mean voters who lack a physical address, or others, will be left out in the upcoming election? What needs to be in place to be ensure everyone who wants to cast a ballot, and is legally able to, can?

Homeless citizens are legally allowed to register and vote in every state, and they are often encouraged to list an address that would allow them to receive mail (a shelter, for example), although that may be difficult for some. In practice, I suspect that few homeless individuals do vote, so the implications of mail voting will be minimal in that regard, but nevertheless, [election](#) administrators will need to find ways to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to vote who is legally entitled to do so.

I'm not aware of anyone who is advocating for only mail voting. Even in states like Washington, Oregon, and Colorado that have "all mail" elections, there are still in-person voting centers and other ways for people to cast their votes if, in fact, they don't have a physical address.

In some states like Texas, mail-in voting is not an option for all voters. What needs to be done to change

this? Why are some state leaders against opening up this option for all voters during the pandemic?

Electoral reforms are always contentious, presumably because there are fears that any reform could benefit one party over another, hurt incumbents, or change incentives, for example. The findings we discussed on our podcast from Daniel Thompson and his Stanford University colleagues should be somewhat reassuring to elected officials who are considering expanding mail voting. Voting by mail appears to be a good way to increase participation without systematically benefiting one party over the other.

Some states, like Illinois, allow people to vote by mail for any reason, whereas other states require a valid reason—some states even require witnesses to prove their reason is legitimate. How do these restrictions fare during the time of coronavirus, and how do they affect outcomes?

I don't know if all of these different policies have been studied carefully, but these restrictions could certainly matter in the midst of a global pandemic. In April, for example, many voters in Wisconsin were confused about whether they were required to have a witness (they were), and this led many otherwise legitimate ballots to go uncounted. I suspect it deterred others from voting who couldn't safely find a valid witness during this difficult period of social distancing.

How do you plan on casting your vote in November?

I had always voted in person, but this March, I requested a mail ballot for the first time because of COVID-19. I found voting-by-[mail](#) to be a great experience (especially relative to the hassle of a polling place), and I don't plan to go back anytime soon.

Provided by University of Chicago

Citation: Does voting by mail increase the risk of voter fraud? (2020, July 7) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-07-voting-mail-voter-fraud.html>

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