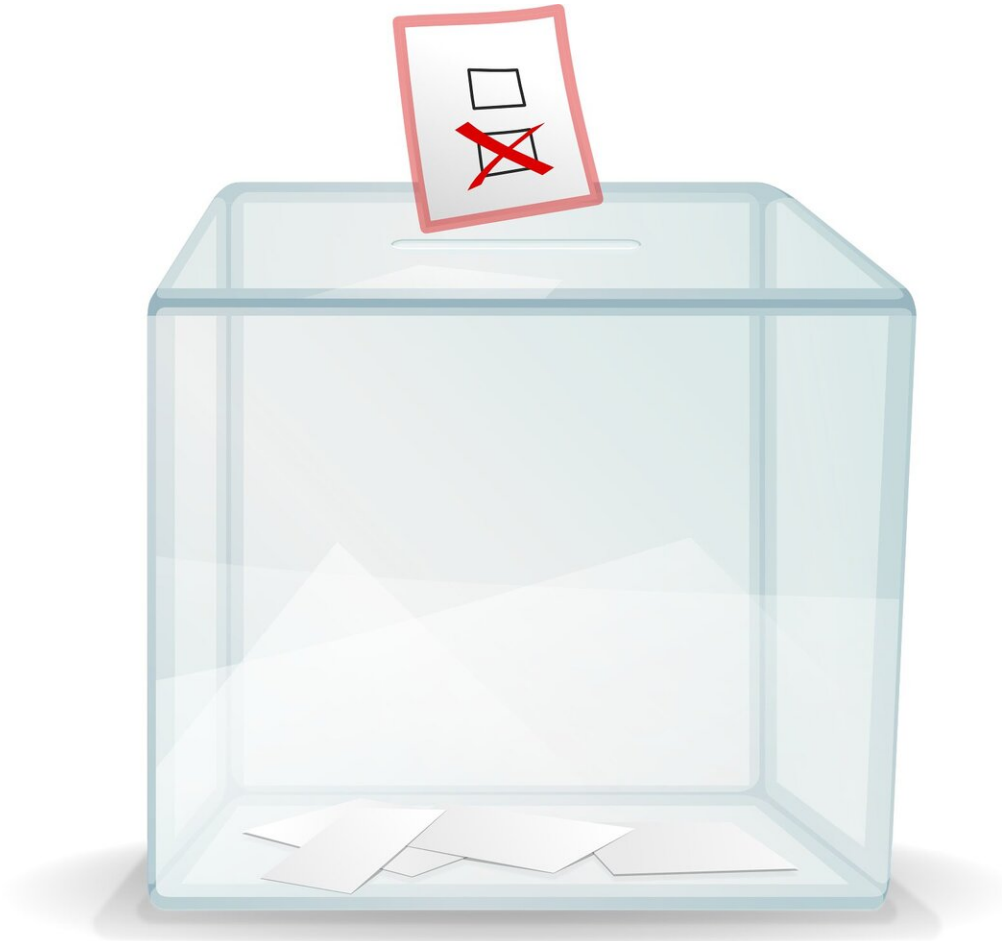


COVID, politics and voting by mail

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The topic of mail-in voting has been top news lately, with Democrats touting its benefits early in the pandemic while some Republicans,

President Trump in particular, insisted that the method is rife with fraud, a claim with no evidence to support it. Then came the report of recent cost-cutting measures by the U.S. Postal Service, just as record numbers of voters are expected to send their ballots via mail.

A group of researchers at the Penn Program on Opinion Research and Election Studies (PORES) has looked into how much support for voting by mail (VBM) was impacted by the pandemic, partisanship, and efforts by partisan elites to politicize discussion about expanding the use of VBM in November.

The new research by Stephen Pettigrew and Sarah Lentz, along with PORES Faculty Director John Lapinski and PORES fellow Josh Clinton, shows that in April bipartisan support for voting by mail fell sharply after just six weeks because Republicans appeared to be less worried about catching COVID-19 and became more opposed to the method of voting.

"The pandemic originally increased public support for expanding VBM to help combat the spread of COVID-19, creating a relatively unique opportunity to examine the public's willingness to reconsider how elections are administered," the group says in its findings. "But decreasing COVID-19 concerns among Republicans and increased opposition among unconcerned Republicans (perhaps due to increased partisan messaging) has combined to increase partisan divisions in otherwise historically high levels of [public support](#) for VBM."

Penn Today spoke with Pettigrew and Lentz about the research, what they found surprising, and what it could mean come November.

What made you decide to look at this topic in particular?

Pettigrew: When the pandemic started, we were in the midst of the presidential primaries and we recognized immediately the potential implications that the pandemic was going to have on the way that elections were going to be run. Right off the bat, we wanted to get into the field with a survey on general attitudes about COVID and about politics, with some questions regarding how people want to vote, what they're comfortable with, and what they think are reasonable ways to address the issue of voting.

It worked out that we ran the first version of the study in April, and right around the time we were wrapping up there suddenly was a lot of attention, particularly by President Trump but also from other politicians, about this issue and it became politicized. We had always planned to do a few waves of the survey, but it became perfect timing that about six weeks later we would have the opportunity to see how this elite messaging, and the fact that politicians were really talking about this issue, would affect voters. Vote by mail is an issue that, frankly, not a lot of Americans thought a lot about until pretty recently. People have shifted the way they think about it after getting these elite cues, and that was something we wanted to dig into.

What was your process?

Lentz: Some things that we looked at when we got the first wave of data were expanding early voting, more polling places, prepaying for postage for people to mail their ballots. We looked into that and saw, especially in between the two waves, that the vote by mail issue was the most interesting. Especially after Wisconsin's primary, which was in April.

One of my jobs in this paper was looking through all of Trump's tweets and right around that time in late April/early May was when he went on a tweet storm about voting by mail. So, we had a general increase of support at the beginning, but then in six weeks there was a big partisan

gap. That was the most compelling story we found to tell.

Was there anything about your findings that surprised you?

Pettigrew: One of the things that really was interesting to me was going back through polling archives that have raw survey data, some going back decades and decades. What we worked on was to try and find as many instances in the past where surveys had asked a question similar to ours, about expanding vote by mail or going to universal vote by mail.

We found a bunch of those past surveys, and in all of them we found that support for expanding vote by mail was modest at best. Maybe a third or so of people who would say that they would support having broader access to vote by mail. But more importantly, what we saw was that there wasn't a very big gap between Democrats, Republicans, and Independents in their levels of support for those policies.

In our research, what you see across the board is that as soon as the pandemic started, the level of support for vote by mail jumped an insane amount among every group, but you also saw this gap between Democrats and Republicans widen. So, you did see a big jump, for instance, in Republicans going from a third saying they wanted to expand vote by mail to maybe half or so, which is a pretty big jump. But you also saw Democrats going from a third to about 75-80%. For those shifts in public opinions to have happened so quickly is pretty remarkable.

It's pretty obvious that the world is very weird right now, and that big events like this do shift the way people think about things, but it's unusual. Maybe not surprisingly unusual, but it's certainly unusual how much support for expansion of vote by mail has changed just in the last

six months.

What are some important takeaways from your findings?

Pettigrew: Our paper corroborates what decades of research about public opinion has shown, which is that when elites start to get polarized on an issue, everybody kind of falls into their camp. It's really come to a head in the past few weeks with what's been going on with the post office.

Something that's really important is the issue of confidence in the integrity of the system. It's important in a democracy that people trust the results of the election, even if they don't like the results. It's important to make sure that people understand how this system is going to work and are confident that their vote is going to be counted correctly and that other people's votes are going to be counted correctly, and that the result we get reflects the truth.

Lentz: We found more Democrats are planning to vote by mail and so that has a lot of consequences for when we get the votes and the vote count. Most Election Day votes are Republican, and a lot of these later vote by mail votes are Democrat, and that obviously is a big later influx of Democratic votes. That points to what Stephen said about people trusting the integrity of the election. It's not going to be some conspiracy where somehow we find all these late Democratic votes. It's just the nature of how it's been politicized and how people are voting will change.

We've talked about how this cycle, we're not really going to have an Election Day anymore, it's an election week or month. I hope scholarly papers like ours can filter into the popular discussion of getting people used to the idea that counting the votes is going to take a while and that's

to be expected.

Can this research help change the misconception that voting by mail is fraught with fraud?

Pettigrew: Voters tend to trust people on their side, and our paper shows people listen to the message of their side. So even if it's not President Trump, if a huge number of Republicans very vocally came out and said, "Hey, this system is safe, and you should trust it." That would have a huge effect.

We finished up our paper in June, and a lot has changed since then. I do wonder if we did this again what we might find just because of these new details, particularly with the post office, and concerns about their capacity to deal with all these ballots. I do wonder how much it's eroding Democrats' confidence in voting by mail.

We were expecting to see these massive splits where maybe two-thirds of the people who vote by mail will be Democrats and two-thirds of the people who [vote](#) in person will be Republicans. That would have big implications because the [mail](#)-in ballots just take longer to be counted. Maybe we won't see splits that are quite that big just because perhaps some Democrats will be nudged back toward voting in person.

Provided by University of Pennsylvania

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