40 years of voting history reveals vote-by-mail does not give either political party an edge
27 August 2020, by Christie Allen

"We were surprised at how consistent our results were," said BYU political science professor Michael Barber, a co-author of the paper.

The study is one of the first to use nationwide data to determine how vote-by-mail shapes elections, making it an important contribution to the current debates about the system's merits.

Barber and his collaborator, John B. Holbein of the University of Virginia, examined records from the past three decades in counties using mandatory vote-by-mail in Colorado, Oregon, Utah, Washington, Nebraska and California, focusing on elections immediately before and after the system was implemented.

To ensure a fine-grained analysis, the research included evaluating over 40 million individual voting records from Utah (traditionally a Republican state) and Washington (traditionally a Democratic state), both of which use statewide vote-by-mail. They also looked for possible effects in a range of races, including those for the U.S. House and Senate, governorships and the U.S. presidency.

It's unsurprising that vote-by-mail slightly increased overall turnout, Barber explained, because of the conveniences it affords. With vote-by-mail, voters have days or weeks to complete a ballot, giving them plenty of time to research candidates and make a decision. Voters can also avoid the hassles of getting time off work, traveling to polling locations and waiting in line.

But the widespread public perception that vote-by-mail gives an edge to Democrats is "puzzling" to Barber, who said there's no evidence to support the notion.

"There are beliefs—I think incorrect beliefs—that
voters who favor the Democratic Party tend to be less motivated to turn out to vote, so if you make it easier to vote you'll get more of that group. It turns out not to be the case."

Barber noted that the research should calm fears about the unusual conditions surrounding the upcoming elections.

"We have elections in all sorts of really crazy circumstances—we even had presidential elections in the middle of the Civil War. Vote-by-mail is one way we can have a fair and secure election in 2020 without putting voters at significant health risks. I would hope that people see this as a public policy that could really benefit our country right now."

More information: Michael Barber et al. The participatory and partisan impacts of mandatory vote-by-mail, Science Advances (2020). DOI: 10.1126/sciadv.abc7685

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