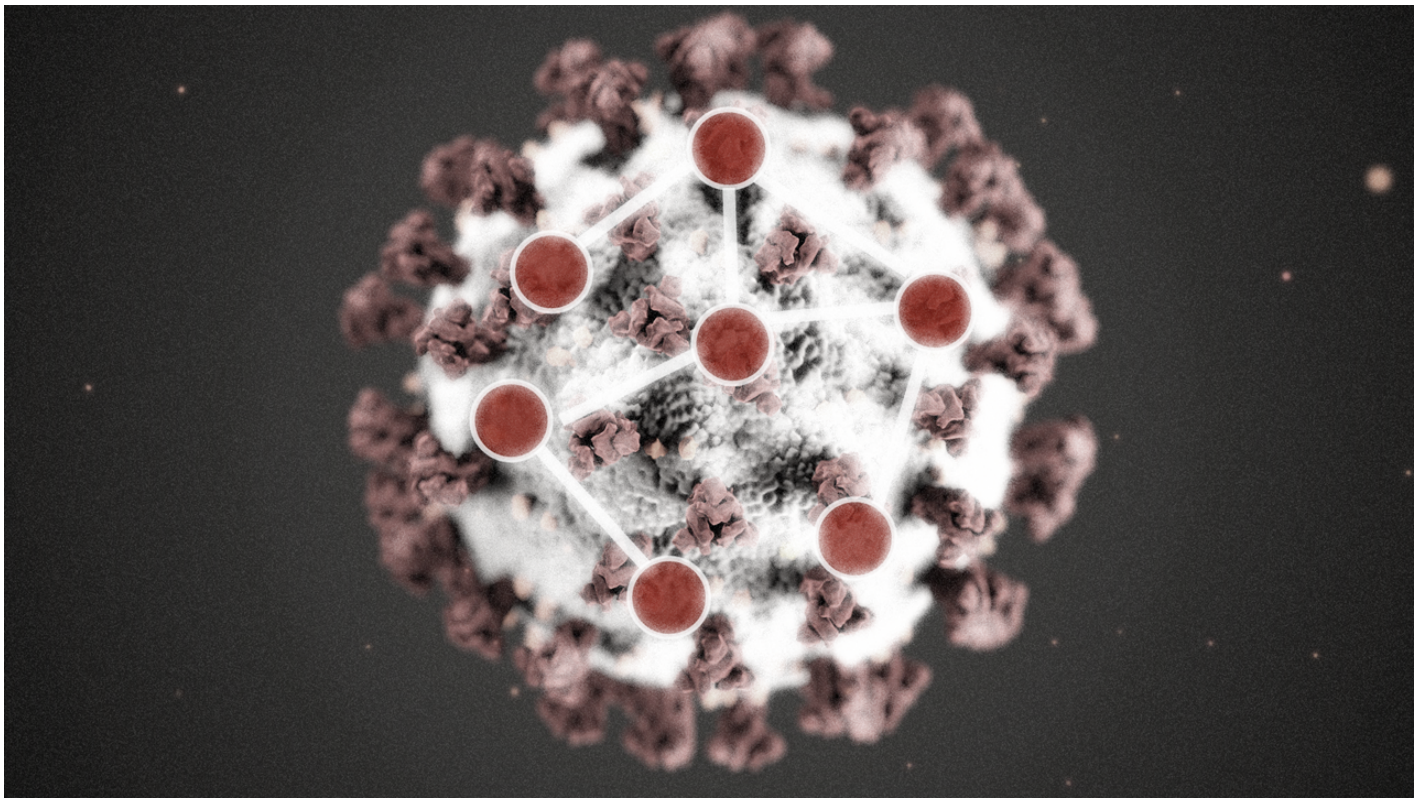

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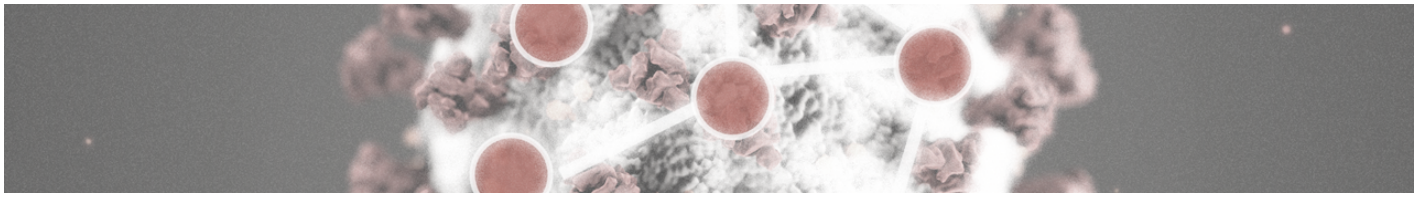
THE STATE OF THE NATION:
A 50-STATE COVID-19 SURVEY
REPORT #16: PARTISAN DIFFERENCES IN INTENTION TO VOTE BY MAIL

USA, October 2020

David Lazer, Northeastern University
Jon Green, Northeastern University
Matthew A. Baum, Harvard University
Alexi Quintana, Northeastern University
Katherine Ognyanova, Rutgers University
Adina Gitomer, Northeastern University
James Druckman, Northwestern University
Matthew Simonson, Northeastern University
Hanyu Chwe, Northeastern University
Roy H. Perlis, Harvard Medical School
Jennifer Lin, Northwestern University
Mauricio Santillana, Harvard Medical School

netsi | Northeastern University Network Science Institute
HARVARD Kennedy School SHORENSTEIN CENTER on Media, Politics and Public Policy
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL
RUTGERS THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY
Northwestern University



Report of October 7, 2020, v.1

***From*:** The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States

A joint project of:
Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University

Authors: David Lazer (Northeastern University); Jon Green (Northeastern University); Matthew A. Baum (Harvard University); Alexi Quintana (Northeastern University); Katherine Ognyanova (Rutgers University); Adina Gitomer (Northeastern University); James Druckman (Northwestern University); Matthew Simonson (Northeastern University); Hanyu Chwe (Northeastern University); Roy H. Perlis (Harvard Medical School); Jennifer Lin (Northwestern University); and Mauricio Santillana (Harvard Medical School)

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COVER MEMO

Summary Memo — October 7, 2020

The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States
Partners: Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University

Authors: David Lazer (Northeastern University); Jon Green (Northeastern University); Matthew A. Baum (Harvard University); Alexi Quintana (Northeastern University); Katherine Ognyanova (Rutgers University); Adina Gitomer (Northeastern University); James Druckman (Northwestern University); Matthew Simonson (Northeastern University); Hanyu Chwe (Northeastern University); Roy H. Perlis (Harvard Medical School); Jennifer Lin (Northwestern University); and Mauricio Santillana (Harvard Medical School)

From September 4 to 27 we conducted the ninth wave of a large, 50-state survey, some results of which are presented here. You can find previous reports online at www.covidstates.org.

Note on methods:

We surveyed 20,315 individuals across all 50 states plus the District of Columbia. The survey was conducted on 4-27 September 2020 by PureSpectrum via an online, nonprobability sample, with state-level representative quotas for race/ethnicity, age, and gender (for methodological details on the other waves, see covidstates.org). In addition to balancing on these dimensions, we reweighted our data using demographic characteristics to match the U.S. population with respect to race/ethnicity, age, gender, education, and living in urban, suburban, or rural areas. This was the tenth in a series of surveys we have been conducting since April 2020, examining attitudes and behaviors regarding COVID-19 in the United States.

Contact information:

For additional information and press requests contact:

- Matthew A. Baum at matthew_baum@hks.harvard.edu
- Katherine Ognyanova at katya.ognyanova@rutgers.edu
- David Lazer at d.lazer@neu.edu
- James Druckman at druckman@northwestern.edu
- Roy H. Perlis at rperlis@mgh.harvard.edu
- Mauricio Santillana at msantill@fas.harvard.edu

Or visit us at www.covidstates.org.

Partisan differences in intention to vote by mail could delay election calls in key states

The COVID-19 pandemic has led many election administrators, as well as voters, to reconsider the manner in which votes will be cast during the 2020 general election. With many voters wary of waiting in line in person beside strangers on Election Day, registrars around the country are preparing for a far higher share of ballots to be cast by mail than ever before. The best available academic research suggests that holding elections entirely by mail slightly increases turnout, but does not advantage either major political party. Recent research on expanded access to voting by mail during the pandemic has found that, while many voters (and especially Democrats) who would otherwise vote in person take advantage of the opportunity to vote by mail, there is no evidence that the practice has changed any final election results.

However, it is clear that more Democrats than Republicans will be voting by mail in 2020, which means that there may well be substantial shifts in the margin between Trump and Biden during an extended period of time after Election Day during which votes are still being counted in some states. How large these shifts are will depend on how different the rates of voting by mail are between Trump and Biden supporters, when people mail in their ballots, and the state's rules for receiving and counting votes cast by mail. The 2018 midterm elections are illustrative of the potential shift after the election. Democrats' net seat gain in the House of Representatives increased from 26 to 41 after Election Day because of (1) slow counting of votes that had arrived by mail, and (2) late arriving ballots.

Here we evaluate three questions:

- ***How many people report that they will vote by mail in each state?***
- ***What will be the difference in candidate choice between those who vote on the day of the election versus those who vote by mail?***
- ***What is the potential shift in the margin between Trump and Biden from the day of voting to a count that incorporates votes received by mail?***

To evaluate these questions, we use the most recent two waves of our 50-state survey, which included a question asking 37,659 respondents how likely they were to vote by absentee or mail-in ballot. In a small number of states, this question is not very informative because voting by mail is the primary method by which people vote. And in many other states, mail-in ballots are processed as they are received or well before Election Day,

meaning that they are counted relatively quickly. However, in 10 states, mail-in ballots cannot be processed until Election Day, likely slowing the rate at which their results can be reported. Further, 18 states and the District of Columbia will process postmarked ballots received after Election Day.

In Table 1, we present the estimates for the proportion of likely voters in all 50 states plus the District of Columbia who say they are "somewhat" or "very" to vote by mail, in comparison with the observed rates in 2016. States where Trump and Biden are currently projected by FiveThirtyEight to be within 10 points of each other are flagged as competitive. We also present estimates of the possible shift in Trump's margin relative to Biden from the votes cast on the day of the election to all votes, including those cast by mail, that vary based on statistical uncertainty regarding the shares of each candidate's likely voters who say they are likely to vote by mail.

Table 1: Differences in Vote Margin by Likelihood of Voting by Mail

Table includes rates of voting by mail in 2016, share of likely voters who report they are either somewhat or very likely to vote by mail, Donald Trump's margin against Joe Biden among likely voters who say they are not likely to vote by mail, Donald Trump's margin against Joe Biden among all likely voters, and estimates of this difference. Lower and upper bounds on these estimates are calculated using 95% confidence intervals for the shares of Trump and Biden supporters who are likely to vote by mail, holding Trump and Biden's vote shares constant.
State rates of voting by mail in 2016 from Pew Research: www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/06/24/as-states-move-to-expand-the-practice-relatively-few-americans-have-voted-by-mail. Competitive states defined as being projected to be within ten points by FiveThirtyEight as of October 1: projects.fivethirtyeight.com/2020-election-forecast.

State	Competitive	VBM 2016	Somewhat/ Very likely VBM 2020	Trump Margin Unlikely VBM	Trump Margin Overall	Difference Low VBM	Difference Estimate	Difference High VBM
USA	---	0.21	0.59	0.29	-0.10	-0.38	-0.38	-0.38
AK	Yes	0.07	0.55	0.05	-0.11	-0.15	-0.16	-0.18
AL	No	0.03	0.36	0.53	0.21	-0.31	-0.32	-0.32
AR	No	0.04	0.41	0.44	0.09	-0.34	-0.35	-0.36
AZ	Yes	0.68	0.79	0.48	-0.03	-0.57	-0.51	-0.46
CA	No	0.51	0.84	0.15	-0.27	-0.43	-0.42	-0.41

CO	Yes	0.86	0.81	0.55	-0.10	-0.72	-0.64	-0.57
CT	No	0.03	0.52	0.07	-0.19	-0.25	-0.26	-0.27
DC	No	0.12	0.81	-0.72	-0.53	0.40	0.19	-0.02
DE	No	0.04	0.47	0.11	-0.18	-0.25	-0.29	-0.33
FL	Yes	0.27	0.61	0.22	-0.13	-0.35	-0.35	-0.34
GA	Yes	0.06	0.50	0.28	-0.05	-0.32	-0.33	-0.33
HI	No	0.39	0.85	0.48	-0.03	-0.67	-0.51	-0.36
IA	Yes	0.25	0.56	0.36	0.01	-0.35	-0.34	-0.33
ID	No	0.09	0.54	0.65	0.23	-0.46	-0.42	-0.38
IL	No	0.11	0.55	0.16	-0.18	-0.33	-0.34	-0.35
IN	No	0.05	0.41	0.30	0.04	-0.25	-0.26	-0.26
KS	No	0.14	0.46	0.40	0.14	-0.28	-0.26	-0.25
KY	No	0.02	0.53	0.59	0.16	-0.45	-0.43	-0.41
LA	No	0.04	0.35	0.21	0.01	-0.18	-0.20	-0.22
MA	No	0.05	0.62	0.08	-0.31	-0.37	-0.39	-0.41
MD	No	0.06	0.65	0.25	-0.32	-0.56	-0.58	-0.59
ME	No	0.17	0.54	0.37	0.02	-0.35	-0.35	-0.34
MI	Yes	0.25	0.67	0.43	-0.12	-0.56	-0.55	-0.54
MN	Yes	0.07	0.53	0.22	-0.15	-0.36	-0.37	-0.37
MO	Yes	0.05	0.34	0.33	0.15	-0.18	-0.18	-0.18
MS	No	0.04	0.32	0.28	0.08	-0.18	-0.20	-0.22
MT	No	0.57	0.76	0.50	0.00	-0.56	-0.50	-0.44
NC	Yes	0.03	0.45	0.26	-0.03	-0.28	-0.29	-0.29
ND	No	0.17	0.56	0.37	-0.04	-0.41	-0.41	-0.40
NE	No	0.23	0.61	0.52	0.09	-0.49	-0.43	-0.38
NH	Yes	0.06	0.44	0.05	-0.22	-0.24	-0.27	-0.30
NJ	No	0.07	0.69	0.30	-0.26	-0.56	-0.56	-0.56
NM	No	0.10	0.69	0.27	-0.25	-0.54	-0.52	-0.50
NV	Yes	0.08	0.65	0.47	-0.15	-0.64	-0.62	-0.60

NY	No	0.05	0.54	0.07	-0.22	-0.28	-0.29	-0.30
OH	Yes	0.22	0.66	0.50	-0.06	-0.57	-0.55	-0.53
OK	No	0.06	0.35	0.40	0.21	-0.20	-0.20	-0.19
OR	No	0.97	0.90	0.24	-0.11	-0.41	-0.35	-0.29
PA	Yes	0.04	0.51	0.29	-0.07	-0.35	-0.36	-0.36
RI	No	0.05	0.56	0.18	-0.31	-0.47	-0.49	-0.52
SC	Yes	0.08	0.46	0.34	0.03	-0.31	-0.31	-0.32
SD	No	0.08	0.38	0.24	-0.02	-0.23	-0.27	-0.30
TN	No	0.02	0.33	0.33	0.15	-0.18	-0.18	-0.18
TX	Yes	0.07	0.46	0.15	-0.07	-0.22	-0.23	-0.23
UT	No	0.68	0.74	0.79	0.21	-0.71	-0.58	-0.45
VA	No	0.06	0.49	0.14	-0.13	-0.26	-0.27	-0.28
VT	No	0.17	0.69	0.39	-0.28	-0.72	-0.67	-0.61
WA	No	0.97	0.91	0.24	-0.24	-0.52	-0.49	-0.46
WI	Yes	0.09	0.57	0.28	-0.15	-0.42	-0.43	-0.43
WV	No	0.02	0.42	0.63	0.29	-0.36	-0.34	-0.33
WY	No	0.13	0.38	0.69	0.35	-0.39	-0.34	-0.28

A few things are evident from this table. First, consistent with our earlier reports, **a huge number of people plan on voting by mail: nearly 40% of all likely voters say they are very likely to vote by mail and nearly 59% are at least somewhat likely to do so**, only slightly lower than the 41% and 64% we observed in July, respectively. Second, there continues to be a lot of variation by state regarding how many people plan to vote by mail, ranging from 32% in Mississippi to over 84% in California, along with near 100% expected rates in the universal vote by mail states of Colorado, Hawaii, Oregon, Utah, and Washington. Third, there is a large difference in candidate preference between those who plan to vote in person versus by mail. As of now, we estimate a net 20-point swing in Biden's favor from likely voters who are not "very likely" to vote by mail to likely voters overall. **Trump leads by a remarkable 68% to 23% among those who say they are very unlikely to vote by mail, and by a still robust 50% to 39% among all but those who say they are very likely to vote by mail. Biden, however, leads among all likely voters by 50% to 40%.**

Fourth, the pattern of a shift toward Biden driven by mail-in voting is quite robust across the country. We anticipate a shift toward Biden in every state -- with the only exception being DC, a likely function of the high (over 80%) rate of citizens who are at least somewhat likely to vote by mail.

Within a state, the magnitude of the shift is a product of how many of each candidate's supporters say they are very likely to vote by mail. In Alaska, for example, more than half of the state's likely voters say they are at least somewhat likely to vote by mail, and Biden supporters in the state are somewhat more likely than Trump supporters to indicate as such, translating into difference in Trump's margin of roughly 16 percentage points between those who are unlikely to vote by mail and likely voters overall. By contrast, nearly 70% of likely voters in Vermont report being at least somewhat likely to vote by mail, and we anticipate that the difference in the state between likely voters who are not likely to vote by mail and likely voters overall is 66 percentage points.

These potential swings are big enough that, at the end of election night, Trump may have an apparent lead in both the popular vote and the Electoral College, yet solidly lose by week's end. How plausible is this scenario? As political scientists Stewart and Persily have noted, many of these votes will be counted upon arrival and/or on Election Day, which will mean that we will not see these massive shifts in vote margins after election night counts in many states. However, **the unprecedented logistical challenge of counting for all states, with by our estimate as many as 82 million[1] votes arriving by mail -- for most states, more than 6.5 times the rate observed in 2016 -- combined with the fact that some states do not start counting mail-in ballots until Election Day, and the certainty of millions of late arriving ballots, means that there will likely be a sizable and systematic shift in the vote count *toward Biden after* election day.**

The most important cases in terms of evaluating how the election will look on election night versus in the days that follow are states that (1) are competitive, and (2) either do not begin counting votes arriving by mail until the day of the election, or accept late arriving ballots. Nine states satisfy these two criteria: Texas, North Carolina, Alaska, Pennsylvania, New Hampshire, Ohio, Wisconsin, Michigan, and Nevada.

Given the partisan differences in reported intention to vote by mail, these 9 states are the most likely to have substantial vote shifts toward Biden that could affect the outcome of the election. Figure 1 presents estimates for this potential shift in Trump's share of the two party vote between the night of the election and the days that follow.

[1] This number is derived by taking the 2016 general election turnout of 138,846,571 (from the United States Election Project http://www.electproject.org/2016g) and multiplying it by the percentage of our respondents who say they are somewhat or very likely to vote by mail.

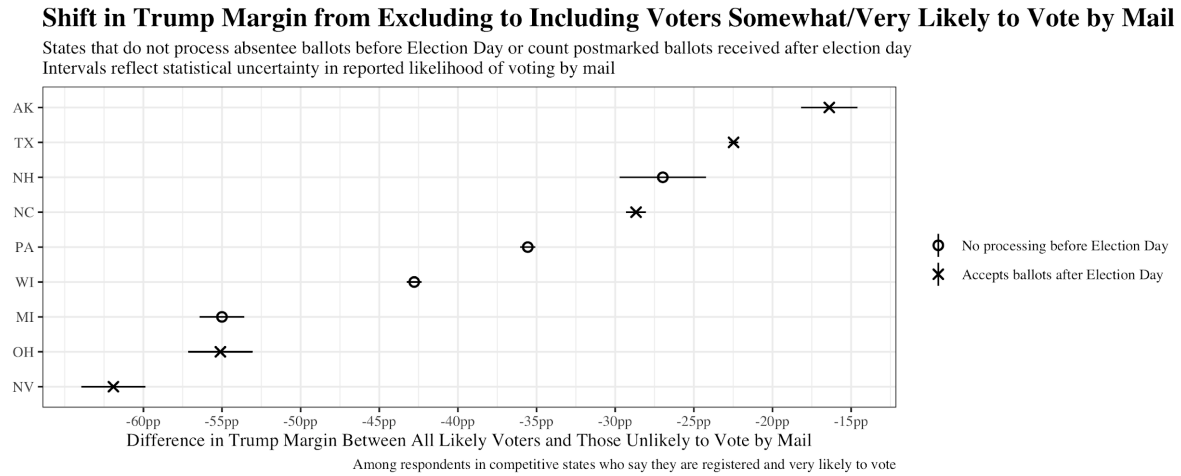

Figure 1: Differences in Vote Margin by Likelihood of Voting by Mail in Competitive States with Potential for Late Counts.

In all of these competitive states, as is the case elsewhere, delays in counting mail-in ballots relative to in-person ballots likely indicate shifts in vote margin toward Biden over time. In some states, such as Texas and North Carolina, that count mailed-in ballots as they receive them, this "blue shift" may be relatively small and we may know who wins their electoral votes relatively early on election night. However, other states -- including the key battleground states of Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin -- have much greater potential for what appear to be Trump leads on election night giving way to Biden leads as mail-in ballots are counted over the subsequent days.

Conclusions

The above analysis highlights the potential for the popular vote and the electoral college to shift toward Biden after election night. Trump will have a substantial lead among those who vote the day of the election; and Biden an even large margin lead those who vote by mail. How much this translates into a post-election-day blue shift depends on how quickly states count votes by mail. There are 9 competitive states that, because they either allow votes to arrive after election day or do not start counting until election day, will plausibly lag substantially in counting votes. This possibility puts a particular onus on the media and on political elites: For the media, to set expectations that vote totals may shift substantially after election day, very likely toward Biden; and for political elites, to make sure the voting systems are well resourced and to not exploit the time lag in reporting results to undermine the legitimacy of the election.