

Study shows mail-in voting did not provide an advantage for either political party



A new study has found that making mail-in voting easier in last year's elections did not provide a significant advantage to either political party in terms of turnout, nor did it pave the way for voter fraud.

Without the expanded ability to vote by mail that many states provided last year, some voters might have stayed home for fear of exposure to COVID-19. But a study by Stanford University's Institute for Economic Policy Research found that voting by mail did not result in a higher voter turnout for one party over the other.

In the high-stakes elections of 2020, voters of both parties showed up to vote in greater numbers than in previous elections, in person as well as by mail. "Voter interest appears to be far more important in driving turnout," the authors wrote. Voter turnout—the proportion of eligible voters who cast ballots—grew almost as much in states that did not ease restrictions on voting by mail as in those that did.

There already is scant evidence that mail-in voting causes an increase in voter fraud. This study boosts the case for the integrity of mail-in voting, and it takes away another basis for restrictions on voting by mail that several states are considering.

Not only did voting by mail not enable fraud, it did not give either party an advantage in states where voting by mail was easier over states with more restrictions.

"Instead, turnout is up dramatically for both groups of states," the Stanford study's authors wrote.

"Compared to the 2016 presidential election, turnout was up roughly 4.8 percentage points in states that did not implement no-excuse absentee voting for 2020, and up roughly

5.6 percentage points in states that did." Statistically, the 0.8 percentage point difference was too small to pin on voting procedures as a cause, they wrote, especially since larger variations happened in previous elections.

To dig deeper, the study looked at Texas, which had a parallel system of voting last year. In that state, voters aged 65 or older could vote absentee with no excuse, while younger voters were required to have a specific reason. That gave researchers a chance to compare the two groups within a state. They found no significant difference in turnout between the two age groups compared to their turnout in previous elections.

The Stanford study echoes other studies that found no partisan edge due to voting by mail in previous elections.

Last June, as many states were easing restrictions on mail voting in response to the pandemic, the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) published a Stanford analysis of three states that rolled out mail voting county by county, which provided an opportunity for a "natural experiment" similar to Stanford's examination of the 2020 election results in Texas. The study published by NAS compared counties in these states—California, Utah and Washington—that did not use vote-by-mail with those that did. Comparing the results in these counties with the results from election years between 1996 and 2018 indicated that voting by mail did not bring a partisan shift in voting.

Researchers have scrutinized mail voting since Oregon became the first state to adopt a universal vote-by-mail election system beginning with the 2000 election. A Massachusetts

Institute of Technology (MIT) study published in 2001 found no change in partisan advantage in Oregon from its new voting scheme versus its old one.

Scientific scrutiny of voting data also refutes the argument that voting by mail makes voter fraud more likely. When MIT political science professor Charles Stewart III and National Vote at Home Coalition Executive Director Amber McReynolds analyzed data on voter fraud, they showed just how rare it is.

Writing in *The Hill* in April 2020, Stewart and McReynolds used a database compiled by a conservative think tank to find 143 criminal convictions for mail fraud in the last 20 years—equal to about 0.00006 percent of the total votes cast by mail. In Oregon, the incidence of vote-by-mail fraud was even lower, with only two criminal convictions for fraud since the state adopted universal voting by mail.

“That is 0.000004 percent—about five times less likely than getting hit by lightning in the United States,” they wrote.

The nonpartisan Commission on Federal Election Reform, co-chaired by former President Jimmy Carter and former Secretary of State James A. Baker III, found in 2005 that voting by mail could be vulnerable to fraud when adequate safeguards, similar to measures used for in-person voting, were not in place. When fraud-prevention measures are present, though, the commission found that voting by mail is just as safe from fraud as is in-person voting.

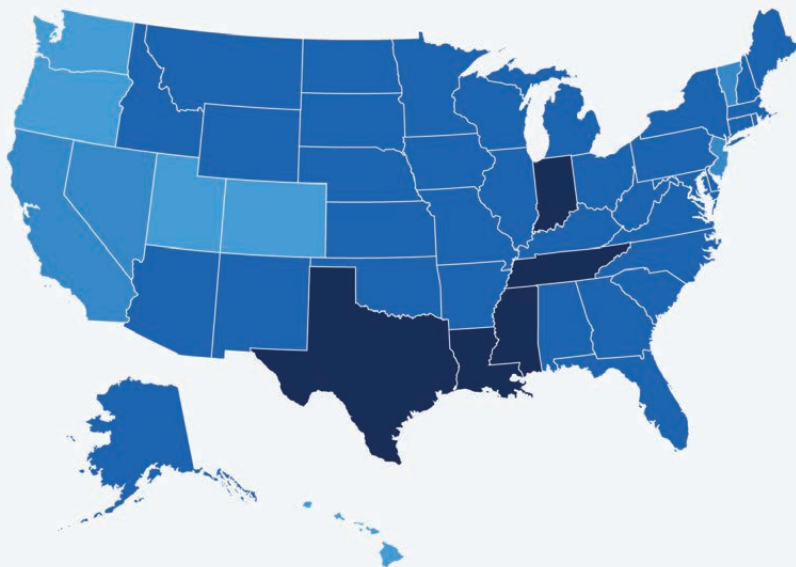
In 2020, Carter urged states to expand voting by mail.

“The research is clear: Voting by mail is good for everyone, regardless of whom they vote for,” NALC

President Fredric Rolando said. “It’s safe, honest and fair. The last election proved that mail voting should remain a permanent part of our democracy.” **PR**

Mail-in voting in the 2020 elections

- All vote by mail
- Ballots automatically mailed to voters
- Voters can vote by mail*
- Excuse required
(fear of COVID-19 not permitted)



*Includes states that do not require an excuse, or allow fear of COVID-19 to be an excuse



Source: Various US state election offices, NPR. 14 October 2020