Universal Vote-by-Mail increases Democratic Vote Share

Christopher T. Kenny, Dominic J. Valentino

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Abstract

This is a rough draft. If it seems incomplete, that's because it is. To state the obvious, don't distribute this please. Thank you for reading! Please direct any comments to christopherkenny@fas.harvard.edu or dvalentino@g.harvard.edu.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, voting by mail has become increasingly common as states act to make it easier for citizens to cast their ballots safely. Some states have expanded access by allowing citizens to request an absentee ballot without an excuse (or by allowing citizens to use fear of COVID as an excuse), some go further by automatically mailing applications for absentee ballots, and still more automatically mail the ballots themselves to all registered voters.

Alongside these efforts to ease access to the franchise amid a pandemic, the issue of mail voting (and the pandemic more generally) has become politicized. The president has railed against mail voting (which he characterizes differently than absentee voting despite the two being identical) which led Republicans to be far more likely to vote in person, while Democrats largely turned to mail voting. This dynamic was fueled in part by politicization of the severity of the virus (Republicans are far more likely to believe the pandemic is overblown than Democrats[1]) and of the security of mail voting (Republicans are less likely to trust mail ballots[2]).

The recent shift towards mail voting has spurred renewed scholarly interest in the practice. Does access to vote-by-mail (VBM) increase turnout? Does it advantage one party or the other, either in turnout or in vote share? Recent work is exemplified by Thompson et al. (2020), who seek to answer these questions. The authors investigate whether universal vote-by-mail (VBM) has an impact on partisan vote share, partisan turnout rates, and overall turnout rates from 1996-2018 in California, Utah, and Washington state, where universal VBM was rolled out sequentially over the course of several election cycles by the county. Taking advantage of the staggered policy rollout, the authors employ a difference-in-differences design[3] to estimate causal effects of universal VBM on the quantities of interest.

The authors find that expanding vote-by-mail does not affect partisan turnout or Democratic vote share but slightly increases overall turnout.

In this paper, we build on this study by addressing two points for improvement. First, the authors studied universal VBM expansion in states that are safely Democratic (Washington, California) or Republican (Utah), as a result of focusing on a recent subset of states with prolonged roll outs of universal VBM. We extend their analysis to states that are more purple, such as Nevada, which was close in the 2016 and 2020 elections. Nevada expanded vote by mail in response to the pandemic,

[1] See this poll by Pew Research for one example, though this may change as the pandemic ensues.

[2] See this recent Politico Poll.

[3] $Y_{cst} = \beta VBM_{cst} + \gamma_{cs} + \delta_{st} + \epsilon_{cst}$ where Y_{cst} is an outcome in county c, state s, and year t, and γ_{cs} and δ_{st} are county and state-year fixed effects respectively.

which will allow us to estimate the treatment effect of expanded VBM plus the pandemic on partisan vote share, partisan turnout, and overall turnout. In total, we expand our analysis to include Montana, Colorado, Nevada, Vermont, New Jersey, and Hawaii as well as the original states, California, Utah, and Washington (although our preliminary results are based only on Utah, Montana, Vermont, and Nevada)[4]. Second, we hope to extend their analysis to elections during the pandemic, which profoundly affected the demand for mail voting, and during which time the topic of mail voting has become highly politicized. We believe these adjustments will not only add to the validity of the results but may also change the results entirely - partisan vote share may be affected if one party utilizes vote-by-mail more often than the other does.

Indeed, our preliminary results suggest that Democratic vote share is increased by expanding access to vote-by-mail. Turnout may be increased as well, but point estimates of the effect of VBM expansion on overall turnout are not precise and statistically indistinguishable from zero.

Data

We extend the analysis in Thompson et al. (2020) by updating the analysis with results in the 2020 election not only in the the three states from their analysis (California, Utah, and Washington) but in six more states: Montana[5], Colorado, Nevada, Vermont, New Jersey, and Hawaii. All of these states either had already implemented universal VBM by 2020 or did so in response to the COVID-19 public health crisis.

We collect election returns from all statewide elections between 2000 and 2020[6]. From these data we observe Democratic two-party vote share as well as the total number of ballots cast. We combine election returns with data on estimated citizen voting age population (CVAP) in each county, allowing us to observe turnout rates as a function of the citizen voting age population at the county level.

For this iteration, we only have data for Utah, Montana, Vermont and Nevada, since the other states of interest have no yet certified the 2020 vote. We plan to add the remaining states as they certify over the next few days.

[4]Our preliminary analysis is limited to these four states because they are the only states who had certified their votes at the time of writing.

[5]Montana is particularly valuable because only some counties implemented universal VBM in response to the pandemic, allowing for within-election and within-state comparison between counties that did and did not have universal VBM.

[6]This excludes the off-year gubernatorial elections in New Jersey. We believe these elections are too dissimilar from even year elections to include in the analysis. Not to mention the fact that we lack data on these elections as well.

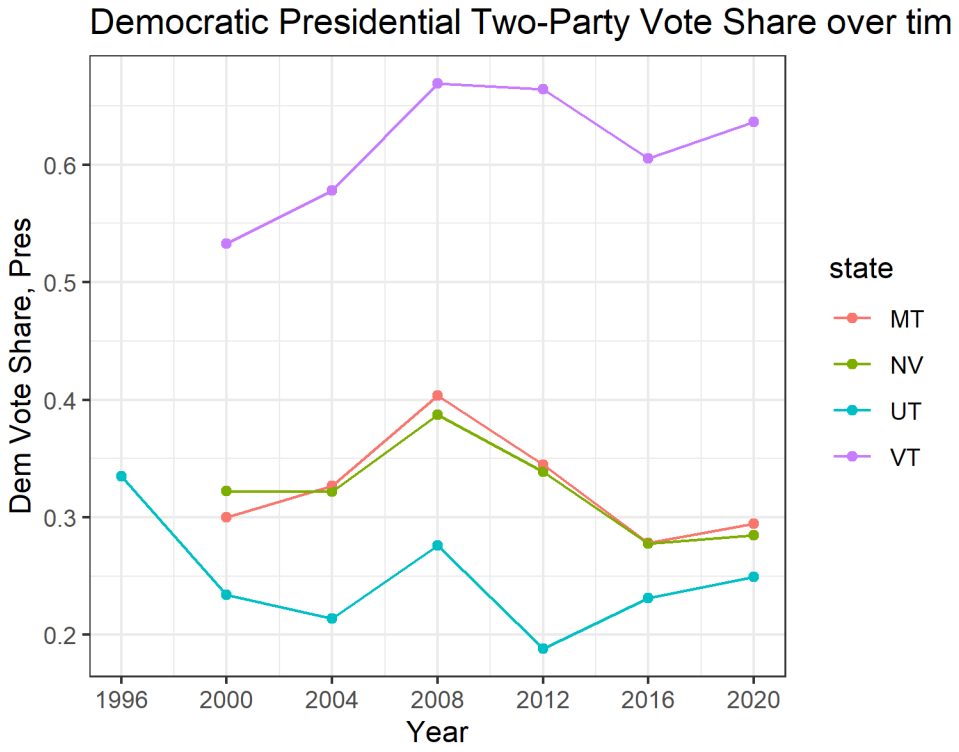

Figure 1: Democratic two-party vote share in presidential election years by state.

Results

Preliminary results based on Utah, Montana, Vermont, and Nevada are shown below. We plot the Democratic two-party vote share and turnout in figures 1 and 2, respectively. We find that trends are roughly parallel (it is important to note, however, that some counties are treated before 2020 in Utah, so these are not entirely pre-trends).

Estimated effects can be found in tables 1 and 2. Analogous results from Thompson et al. (2020) can be found in columns 4-5 in table A1 and columns 1-2 in table A2 respectively. As you can see from table 1, VBM expansion appears to significantly increase Democratic vote share, contradicting Thompson et al. (2020). VBM expansion increases turnout as well - we find similar point estimates as Thompson et al. (2020) with larger standard errors, rendering our estimates insignificant where theirs were significant.

Appendix

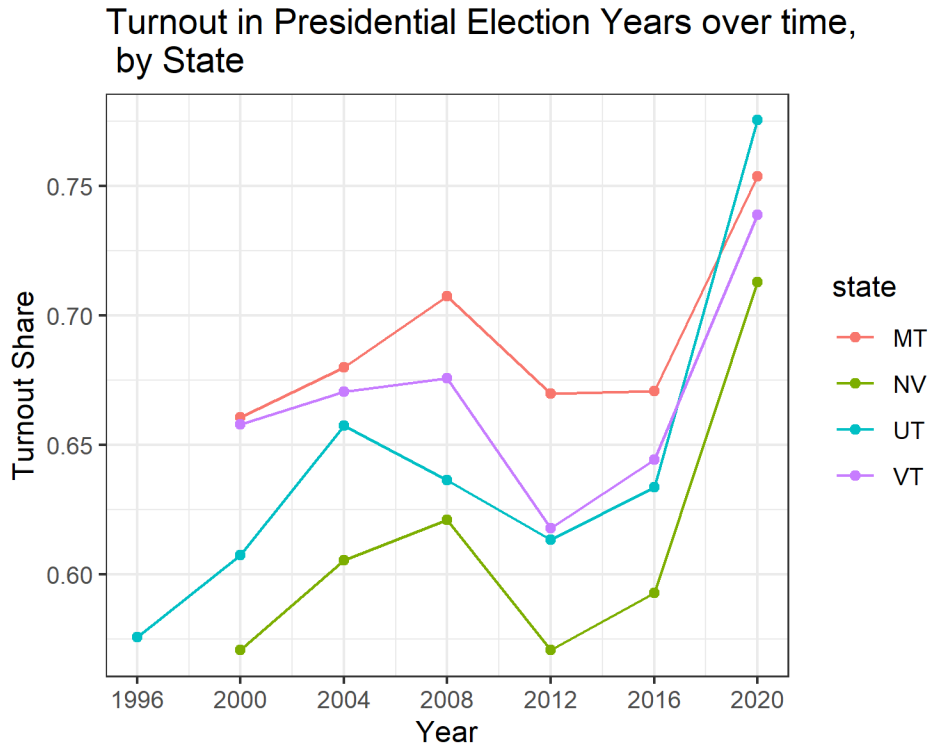

Figure 2: Turnout in presidential election years by state.

References

Thompson, Daniel M, Jennifer A Wu, Jesse Yoder and Andrew B Hall. 2020. "Universal vote-by-mail has no impact on partisan turnout or vote share." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* .

Table 1: **Vote-by-Mail Expansion May Favor Democratic Candidates.**

	Dem Vote Share [0-1]	
	(1)	(2)
VBM	0.047	0.031
	(0.014)	(0.011)
# Counties	112	112
# Elections	43	43
# Obs	2344	2344
County FE	Yes	Yes
State by Year FE	Yes	Yes
County Trends	No	Linear

Robust standard errors clustered by county in parentheses.

Table 2: **Vote-by-Mail Expansion Increases Participation.**

	Dem Vote Share [0-1]	
	(1)	(2)
VBM	0.014	0.021
	(0.014)	(0.013)
# Counties	112	112
# Elections	45	45
# Obs	1278	1278
County FE	Yes	Yes
State by Year FE	Yes	Yes
County Trends	No	Linear

Robust standard errors clustered by county in parentheses.

Table A1: **Vote-by-Mail Expansion Does Not Appear to Favor Either Party.**

	Dem Turnout Share [0-1]			Dem Vote Share [0-1]		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
VBM	0.007	0.001	0.001	0.028	0.011	0.011
	(0.003)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.011)	(0.004)	(0.004)
# Counties	87	87	87	126	126	126
# Elections	23	23	23	31	31	31
# Obs	986	986	986	1998	1998	1998
County FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
State by Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
County Trends	No	Linear	Quad	No	Linear	Quad

Robust standard errors clustered by county in parentheses. The number of counties is smaller in columns 1-3 because we have partisan turnout share for CA and UT, but not WA. Columns 4-6 use data from all three states.

Table A2: **Vote-byMail Expansion Increases Participation.**

	Dem Turnout Share [0-1]			Dem Vote Share [0-1]		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
VBM	0.021	0.022	0.021	0.186	0.157	0.157
	(0.009)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.026)	(0.033)	(0.033)
# Counties	126	126	126	58	58	58
# Elections	30	30	30	10	10	10
# Obs	1240	1240	1240	580	580	580
County FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
State by Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
County Trends	No	Linear	Quad	No	Linear	Quad

Robust standard errors clustered by county in parentheses.