

To: Voter Participation Center/Center for Voter Information
From: Henry Fernandez, African American Research Collaborative
Date: August 16, 2020
Re: Poll of African Americans in 6 battleground states on Voting By Mail

Sample: On behalf of VPC, The African American Research Collaborative implemented a battleground state poll of 1,310 African Americans in Florida, Georgia, Michigan, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Texas. The blended phone and online poll ran from August 8 to 14. Respondents are comprised mainly of registered voters (85%) with some eligible to vote, but not yet registered (15%). The margin of error for the full sample is +/-2.7 and for each state is +/-6.6.

Issues: This election for African Americans is about responding to racism (including but not limited to criminal justice reform), Coronavirus and Trump. Secondary, but important issues include lowering the cost of health care and addressing unemployment/wages.

Contradictory Views: When considering vote by mail, African Americans hold two strong views that are potentially contradictory in the current context. They have low levels of trust for or confidence in voting by mail generally (28% lack confidence) and the level of distrust goes up for individual steps in the vote by mail process with 41% having little or no trust their vote will be opened and counted using VBM. At the same time, over three-quarters (78%) are concerned that they might be exposed to Coronavirus at their polling place. In combination, this leads to a 50/50 split in which half of African Americans would prefer to vote in person and half would prefer to vote by mail.

Vote By Mail Choice: To address the split thinking among African Americans around vote by mail, frame vote by mail as a “Choice” that should not be denied. When framed as a choice, Black voters overwhelmingly support the idea that no one should “deny me the right to vote by mail if I so choose” (90%) and would like to be sent information on vote by mail so they can make that choice (87%).

More Information Needed: African Americans do not have high knowledge on how to vote by mail and would like more information. Over one-third of African Americans acknowledge that they do not have enough information from their state to know how to vote by mail. But this likely underestimates lack of knowledge: 49% of Black Texans believe everyone can vote by mail in the state, even though it has some of the toughest restrictions (65+, disabled, in jail or out of county on election day to vote by mail) and the state’s Attorney General has indicated he will enforce these through criminal prosecution.

Cultural and Historic: Voting has cultural and historic implications for African Americans. A tested pro-civil rights voting message (quote from John Lewis’s final letter) resulted in 52% of respondents indicating it would make them much more likely to vote (though this was less popular with 18-29 year olds of whom only 30% indicated it would make them much more likely to vote and 22% indicated it would make them somewhat less likely to vote).

71% of respondents felt voting in person was important because it makes a statement about “our right to vote” because of historic denial of the vote to Black people. Reticence in the Black community to vote by mail is based in facts – both historic and current events. Respondents had higher distrust for elections officials in Texas, Georgia, and North Carolina, three states with both historic de jure disenfranchisement of Black citizens and quite recent public attacks on the Black vote.

Kamala Harris: Because we were polling an equal number of days before and after Biden’s announcement of Harris as his running mate, we can split the data by interview date (before and after the morning of August 11th). We found net +11 on vote choice for Biden over Trump after she was chosen. Those under 40 especially say her selection makes them somewhat or much more likely to vote (82%).

Friends and Family: Based on prior research indicating that Black voters often encourage others to vote, we tested several messages meant to get people to convince their friends and family to vote. An

overwhelming number responded that information about vote by mail (88%), policy differences between Trump and Biden (89%) and down ballot elections (89%) would be helpful to their efforts to encourage others to vote. Information on Trump's COVID-19 response failing to protect Black people and jobs (83%) and Trump's disrespect for Black women (77%) also tested well.

Recommendation: Black voters should not receive a hard push to vote by mail given the very real chance (and their belief) that they may be disenfranchised. Instead, they should be told that voting by mail is a choice and no one should deny them that choice. As you were planning, they should be given clear instructions on how to vote by mail and encouraged to vote by mail early to increase the likelihood that their vote will arrive in time/be counted. Messages should recognize that Black voters may be educating friends and family in addition to themselves (and thus information could be delivered to higher vote propensity voters). In addition to information on voting by mail, messages should include policy differences between Trump and Biden (especially on racism, COVID-19, and health care) as well as why people should vote down ballot. All of these were deemed helpful by respondents in their ability to encourage others to vote.

Key Findings on Vote By Mail:

Requesting Vote by Mail

- 64% of respondents say they know how to request a ballot by mail.
- 49% of Black Texans inaccurately think everyone can request a ballot. Texas law has restrictions¹. Thus, it is unlikely that people in most states really know the process at the levels they self-indicate.
- 87% would like information on how to vote by mail so they can make the choice for themselves.

Trust in Vote by Mail

- 36% completely trust that the correct ballot will be mailed to their current address, while 10% do not trust at all that their ballot will be correctly mailed.
- 57% do not trust election officials in their state to fairly count their ballot if they vote by mail. This is highest in Georgia (65%) followed by North Carolina (61%).
- 66% agree that they prefer to vote in person because they believe their vote is more likely to be counted than if they vote by mail.
- Closest to your view: “voting by mail counts the same as in person, it’s accurate and convenient” (60%) versus “mail ballots don’t get counted accurately and are subject to cheating” (40%) but this is due to high VBM support by people ages 60+ (75%). For younger voters 18-29 the pro-mail ballots response is dead even at 50% and for 30-39 and 40-59, the pro-mail ballot response garners 55%.

COVID-19 and Vote by Mail

- 34% are very concerned their polling place will have COVID-19 while 30% are somewhat concerned.
- 74% prefer to vote by mail because with COVID-19 they will be safer voting by mail.
- 78% concerned that they might be exposed to COVID-19 if voting in person with 38% very concerned. Concern is greatest in Georgia and Pennsylvania.

Other Considerations

- 71% agree that they prefer to vote in person because Black people were denied the right to vote for so long and voting in person makes a statement.
- 24% are very concerned that there will be long lines at polling places and 27% somewhat concerned.
- 58% prefer to vote early (before election day).

¹ To be eligible to vote by mail in Texas, you must: be 65 years or older; be disabled; be out of the county on election day and during the period for early voting by personal appearance; or be confined in jail, but otherwise eligible. <https://www.sos.texas.gov/elections/voter/reqabbm.shtml>