

Absentee Voting Is Popular During COVID-19 But Does Not Change Turnout or Partisan Rates of Voting

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Abstract: The partisan battle over vote-by-mail in the 2020 election is raising questions about how absentee voting will affect political participation and election outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic. We study this question using administrative data from Texas’s July 14th primary runoff, where only people 65 and older could vote absentee without an excuse. Despite concerns that COVID-19 would depress turnout in the absence of absentee voting, we find that the turnout gap between 64 and 65 year olds did not markedly increase during COVID-19, even as the rate of absentee voting tripled relative to previous runoffs. While we find that the gap in rates of absentee voting is three times larger for Democrats than Republicans during the pandemic, high rates of in-person voting by Republicans offset this increase, leaving the partisan composition of turnout unchanged from past runoffs. Though extrapolating these results requires caution, they suggest that expanding absentee voting during the pandemic may cause large numbers of voters to shift to a more health-preserving mode of voting, without necessarily changing election outcomes even despite potential partisan differences in enthusiasm for absentee voting.

Keywords: Vote-by-Mail; Elections; COVID-19

Significance Statement: The COVID-19 pandemic is driving unprecedented interest in vote-by-mail in the U.S., but President Trump and many Republicans oppose it, claiming it will help Democrats. We offer the first analysis of how expanding vote-by-mail affects elections during the pandemic. Studying the July 14th runoff primary in Texas, where an age cutoff provides a natural experiment, we find that take-up rates of absentee voting have tripled, with almost all of this increase occurring among Democratic voters. However, we find no change in overall turnout or the share of votes cast by Democrats. We conclude that absentee voting provides a potentially safer and popular way to vote during the pandemic and does not noticeably increase partisan differences in participation.

1 Introduction

To ensure a legitimate election with broad participation, election experts are calling for expanded opportunities for voters to vote absentee from the safety of their own homes during the COVID-19 pandemic. While many states have expanded absentee voting, partisan concerns may impede it. Although President Trump has declared that “absentee voting is fine,”¹ he has also cast doubt on mail-in voting in general and suggested that it is intended to help Democrats unfairly. Perhaps as a result, eight states including Texas have so far declined to expand absentee voting for November.² It is also possible that many Republicans will not vote absentee even if they have the option. In fact, recent polling suggests a growing divide in support for absentee voting, with Republicans much less positive towards it on average (Lockhart et al. 2020).³ How is expanded absentee voting changing the way people vote during COVID-19, and what are its partisan consequences?

While an extensive literature studies the effect of absentee voting on participation in past election cycles, the electoral effects of absentee voting are likely to be different during COVID-19, given fears related to in-person voting as well as the highly charged partisan debate currently surrounding vote-by-mail in general.⁴ To evaluate the effects of absentee voting

¹<https://www.foxnews.com/politics/trump-says-absentee-voting-okay-because-of-required-process-but-mail-in-would-cause-most-corrupt-election>

²For details on how we arrived at eight states, see the Appendix. This number is current as of August 2020 but is subject to change as states actively debate policy changes for the general election.

³See also <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/07/20/as-covid-19-cases-increase-most-americans-support-no-excuse-absentee-voting/>.

⁴See Table A.2 for a review of the literature. In most studies, the reported relationships between no-excuse absentee policies and overall turnout are null (e.g. Oliver 1996; Gronke, Galanes-Rosenbaum, and Miller 2007; Gronke et al. 2008; Giammo and Brox 2010), or positive but modest (e.g., Karp and Banducci 2001; Francia and Herrnson 2004; Leighley and Nagler 2009; Larocca and Klemanski 2011; Leighley and Nagler 2011)—though see Burden et al. (2014) for an estimated negative relationship. Studies that employ a clear causal design take one of two approaches. First, a few studies estimate the effects of no-excuse absentee on overall turnout using a difference-in-differences design, where the treatment occurs at the state level. These studies generally show null (Fitzgerald 2005; Springer 2012) or even negative (Burden et al. 2014) effects of no-excuse policies on turnout, though difference-in-differences estimates from state-level treatments are generally imprecise (Erikson and Minnite 2009). Second, Meredith and Endter (2015) estimates the effect of no-excuse absentee policies on turnout using an individual-level regression discontinuity design, leveraging Texas’s 65 year-old age cutoff threshold, much like we do here. Meredith and Endter (2015) finds a precisely estimated null effect of the policy on overall turnout in the 2012 general election, though it did lead to a large increase in the share of voters who used absentee-by-mail voting, similar to previous work (Oliver 1996; Dubin and Kalsow 1996; Karp and Banducci 2001).

during the pandemic, we study Texas’s July 14th runoff primary, the only major election to date that was held amid widespread local COVID-19 cases in a state with idiosyncratic variation in the ability to vote absentee, due to Texas’s age cutoff rule for determining who is eligible to vote absentee without an excuse. This age cutoff design, first used in a pre-COVID-19 analysis by Meredith and Endter (2015), allows us to compare similarly aged individuals voting in the same election, some of whom have access to absentee voting and some of whom do not, isolating the causal effect of absentee voting under reasonable assumptions we validate below.

Despite concerns that COVID-19 would depress turnout in the absence of a no-excuse absentee policy, we find only modest effects on overall turnout.⁵ Instead of increasing turnout, access to no-excuse absentee voting during COVID-19 encourages voters who would otherwise vote in person to vote absentee instead. This increased take-up rate indicates that a large number of 64-year-old voters would have preferred to vote absentee in the July runoff but were not able to.

We also find a large partisan gap in the use of no-excuse absentee voting in 2020, nearly triple the size of the partisan gap in 2018. Yet, we do not find evidence that absentee voting has increased Democratic turnout relative to Republican turnout—instead, more Democrats seem to be voting absentee while more Republicans are voting in person.

There are two main reasons to be cautious when interpreting our results. First, our results are specific to a runoff election that featured unusually high levels of Democratic enthusiasm and that had no Republican statewide primaries on the ballot.⁶ While this does

⁵This finding comports not only with much of the literature on no-excuse absentee policies on turnout, but also with the turnout effects of another closely related and well-studied convenience voting reform: universal vote-by-mail, where each registrant is mailed a ballot by default. Studies of universal vote-by-mail often find that they have positive, but modest, effects on overall turnout (e.g., Berinsky, Burns, and Traugott 2001; Gerber, Huber, and Hill 2013; Menger, Stein, and Vonnahme 2015; Thompson et al. 2020). Universal vote-by-mail does not have large effects on partisan turnout or vote shares (Thompson et al. 2020), but it does increase turnout among low-propensity voters (Gerber, Huber, and Hill 2013) and affects voters’ choices in primary elections (Meredith and Malhotra 2011).

⁶As we discuss below, the results are also local to 65-year-old voters, though this seems like a less important caveat given that the turnout of older voters more susceptible to COVID-19 is particularly relevant for our study.

not bias the local estimates—we compare 65 year olds to 64 year olds voting in the same election—high rates of enthusiasm among Democratic voters that boosted overall turnout for the party could lead to higher rates of polarization in absentee voting that would not appear in contests where Republican voters turn out at higher rates.⁷ Because our estimates are local to this particular runoff election, we urge caution in using this estimate to forecast what the exact effects of no-excuse absentee policies could be for the November 2020 election, and we particularly urge caution in drawing firm conclusions from the partisan polarization in casting absentee ballots.⁸

Second, because we study Texas, our estimate is local to a setting where early in-person voting is very common (see Figure A.5 in the Appendix).⁹ Scholars and policymakers have identified early in-person voting as an important component of carrying out an election during a pandemic,¹⁰ so we suspect the turnout effects of absentee voting may be greater in places where the only alternative to absentee voting is to vote in person on election day with everyone else.

Despite these caveats, our paper shows that, in this recent runoff election in Texas, no-excuse absentee policies are popular with many voters and allow them to substitute away from potentially more-dangerous forms of voting during COVID-19 without meaningfully changing overall turnout or the partisan balance of turnout.¹¹ On their own, our results do

⁷In one possible scenario, low enthusiasm among Republican voters leads to only the most dedicated Republican voters turning out to vote. Since these are dedicated voters, the opportunity to newly vote absentee as a 65-year-old may not matter to them. High enthusiasm among Democrats could lead to less habitual, more marginal voters considering voting in the runoff, and being attracted to voting absentee as a result. This could lead the Democratic rate of absentee voting to be higher than the Republican rate for reasons not due to COVID directly.

⁸This effect will depend in part on how COVID-19 cases spread in the run-up to the November 2020 election, along with differences in how these two types of electorates would respond to having no-excuse absentee policies as an available option.

⁹Texas has also opted to expand early its early voting period by one week for the 2020 general election (see <https://www.axios.com/texas-2020-election-trump-mail-in-voting-9182a695-1903-45f9-ba16-19e9df6b35a6.html>).

¹⁰<https://www.lawfareblog.com/ten-recommendations-ensure-healthy-and-trustworthy-2020-election>.

¹¹Cotti et al. (2020) finds a county-level relationship between in-person voting in the 2020 Wisconsin primary and subsequent COVID-19 cases, although Leung et al. (2020) suggests in-person voting was relatively safe. Relatedly, Morris and Miller (2020) finds that Election Day polling place consolidation in the 2020

not indicate whether the eight remaining holdout states should expand absentee voting or not—doing so requires considering many factors not in our analysis, including the cost of expansion, states’ capacity for processing large increases in mail voting, and issues related to election security—but, by highlighting the high take-up rate and the implied preference of an important number of voters to vote absentee, they do indicate an important reason to consider doing so.

2 No-Excuse Absentee Voting in Texas

Throughout the 2020 primary election season, most states relaxed restrictions on no-excuse absentee voting to allow all registered voters to request a mail ballot without being required to provide an excuse. Texas, meanwhile, enforced an age cutoff for voting absentee without an excuse, with only voters age 65 or older eligible to do so.¹² We focus on Texas because it is the only state that held a large election during a time of widespread COVID-19 cases while maintaining this 65-year cutoff for voting absentee without an excuse.¹³

2.1 Administrative Data on Voting in Texas

We construct a new dataset on Texas elections before and during COVID-19 from a few main sources. First, we acquired the Texas voter file from the Texas Department of Elections. Each

Wisconsin primary—which was carried out during the pandemic—may have led to large turnout declines, which suggests that voters may fear congestion at in-person voting locations during COVID-19.

¹²Common excuses for requesting an absentee ballot include a disability, or not planning to be present in one’s county on Election Day. See Figure A.1 in the Appendix for a copy of the absentee ballot request form in Texas, along with its list of valid excuses.

¹³On May 19th, 2020, A U.S. District Court issued a ruling allowing all Texas voters to request a mail-in ballot without an excuse, not just those age 65 or older (see https://static.texastribune.org/media/files/4001c04084c9ef0b96c175ae392c3795/vote-by-mail-injunction.pdf?_ga=2.12571636.1936596417.1595220428-245475441.1593203950). Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton immediately appealed the decision; the next day the U.S. 5th Circuit Court of Appeals put the District Court’s ruling on hold, and it overturned the District Court’s decision soon thereafter. The U.S. Supreme Court declined to reinstate the District Court’s original ruling, meaning that Texas voters under the age of 65 would indeed have to provide an excuse in order to vote by mail in the July 14th runoff election (see https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/courts_law/supreme-court-wont-make-texas-allow-everyone-to-vote-by-absentee-ballot/2020/06/26/b835515c-b7e8-11ea-aca5-ebb63d27e1ff_story.html).

row in the file is a voter, and it includes their state-issued voter ID number, name, date of birth, county, and turnout in the July 14th runoff.¹⁴

One limitation of the 2020 voter file is that it only includes the turnout histories of voters who remain on the voter rolls by 2020, meaning we do not observe the full set of votes cast in elections prior to 2020. To do so, we acquired “snapshots” of the Texas vote histories for every primary, runoff, and general election from 2010-2018 from Ryan Data & Research,¹⁵ a company that has maintained the list of Texas registrants over time, compiled from voter file data from the Texas Department of Elections. With these snapshots, we avoid conditioning on voters who remain registered post-treatment, sidestepping a common source of bias in voter file studies (e.g., Nyhan, Skovron, and Titiunik 2017). We collect census data on age-specific population in each county and year to back out the number of 64 and 65 year olds who do not vote in each election.¹⁶

Texas does not have a traditional party registration system, so we define a voter’s party affiliation based on which party’s primary runoff election they chose to participate in.¹⁷

2.2 Using the Age Cutoff to Estimate the Effect of No-Excuse Absentee Voting

Estimating the effect of no-excuse absentee policies on turnout is difficult because the states that implement no-excuse absentee differ systematically from those that do not implement

¹⁴The Texas July 14th election in Texas featured just one statewide runoff race: a Democratic race for US Senate, where M.J. Hegar narrowly defeated Royce West for the opportunity to run against Republican incumbent John Cornyn (see Table A.5 for a list of statewide races in past runoff elections in Texas). This competitive US Senate race led to the highest Democratic turnout for a runoff in our study period — about 4.3% of the voting age population voted in the Democratic 2020 runoff. And although there were no statewide Republican races on the ballot, 2020 Republican turnout was about 3% of the voting age population, higher than in both 2016 and 2018. Texas also records vote mode, meaning we can observe whether each person voted absentee-by-mail, early in-person, or at their polling place on Election Day.

¹⁵<https://www.ryandata.com/>

¹⁶See <https://seer.cancer.gov/popdata/download.html#19>

¹⁷See <https://www.sos.state.tx.us/elections/laws/advisory2018-15.shtml> for a description of how party affiliation works in Texas.

these policies.¹⁸ In Figure A.6 in the Appendix, we show that the turnout rate in states with no-excuse absentee policies is slightly higher, on average, than states that require an excuse, but from this we cannot determine that the no-excuse policy increased turnout: it could be states' larger populations of older voters, differences in the competitiveness of races across states, or any other omitted factor is driving turnout differences across these states.

To estimate the effect of no-excuse absentee policies on turnout, we would like to carry out an experiment where some voters have access to vote without an excuse, while other similar voters, voting in the same election, do not. To approximate this ideal experiment, we take advantage of an age discontinuity in Texas, where voters 65 years old can vote absentee without an excuse, while voters 64 years old must provide an excuse to vote absentee. We estimate the equation

$$Y_{iat} = \beta((\text{Age} = 65)_{iat} * (\text{Year}=2020)_t) + \gamma(\text{Age} = 65)_{iat} + \delta(\text{Year}=2020)_t + \epsilon_{iat}, \quad (1)$$

where Y is the outcome—voted, voted absentee, or voted early in-person, for example—for individual i , in age bin a , in an election at time t . Because we subset to voters age 64 and 65 at the time of each election, there are only two age bins in the regressions below. And as we mentioned earlier, to avoid conditioning on individuals' being registered to vote we use the full population of 64 and 65 year olds in Texas, coding an individual as not having voted if they are either a) registered but did not vote, or b) not registered.

The γ term represents the effect of no-excuse absentee policies in years before 2020, and δ represents the mean difference in the outcome for 64 year olds in 2020 relative to pre-2020. The coefficient of interest, β , tells us whether the effect of having access to no-excuse absentee (being 65 as opposed to 64) increases turnout more in 2020, during the pandemic, than in previous elections. In this difference-in-differences design, β represents this quantity

¹⁸Biggers and Hanmer (2015) does not find evidence that the partisan makeup of the state legislature or governorship influences the likelihood of enacting no-excuse absentee policies. But states with larger populations of older voters, states that are larger in geographic size, and states in the West are more likely to adopt no-excuse absentee policies, raising questions about the validity of making cross-state comparisons to estimate the effects of no-excuse absentee policies.

if the parallel trends assumption is satisfied. We zoom in on 64 and 65 year olds to make the parallel trends assumption more plausible: for our case, it must be that the turnout trends for 64 year olds provide valid counterfactuals for 65 year olds, had the 65 year olds not had access to no-excuse absentee voting. In a stronger version of this design that we present in Table 1, we interact county fixed effects with the lower order terms, meaning, implicitly, we are only computing counterfactual turnout trends for 65 year olds using 64 year olds within the same county, and therefore hold fixed any unobservable features of local races that affect turnout. In Figure A.7 in the Appendix, we show some suggestive evidence that the parallel trends assumption is likely to be satisfied in our case.¹⁹

Because the variation in no-excuse absentee voting in our study comes from an age threshold, our estimate is specific to 65-year-old voters. The effect of no-excuse absentee policies could be larger or smaller for other age groups, and that effect would depend in part on how concern about health risks from voting in-person vary with age. Nonetheless, we believe the estimate among those age 65 is important, especially given that older voters are most at-risk from the virus.

In an attempt to increase absentee voting, Harris County sent absentee voting applications to all registered voters age 65 or over. Since this layers an additional policy change on top of the other COVID-19-related reasons for a shift toward absentee voting, we hold Harris County out of our main analyses and present them separately in the Appendix.

¹⁹To further bolster the parallel trends analysis, in Appendix A.8 we also carry out analyses at the individual level using date of birth as the forcing variable in a regression-discontinuity design. While this alternative approach offers graphical evidence supporting our main results, the regression discontinuity estimand is local to people born exactly 65 years before each election. The plots make clear that absentee take-up phases in over a number of months after the birthdate threshold, possibly due to people who were already 65 by the March primary requesting an absentee ballot for the rest of the calendar year, or the timing of absentee ballot outreach that targeted people who were already 65 and older a few months before election day. Since we are interested in a more general effect for people near this birthdate threshold, not simply the effect right at the first day someone is eligible to vote absentee, and the parallel trends assumption is quite plausible in our difference-in-differences analyses, we prefer the difference-in-differences estimator.

3 Increase in Absentee Voting But No Increase in Turnout During COVID-19

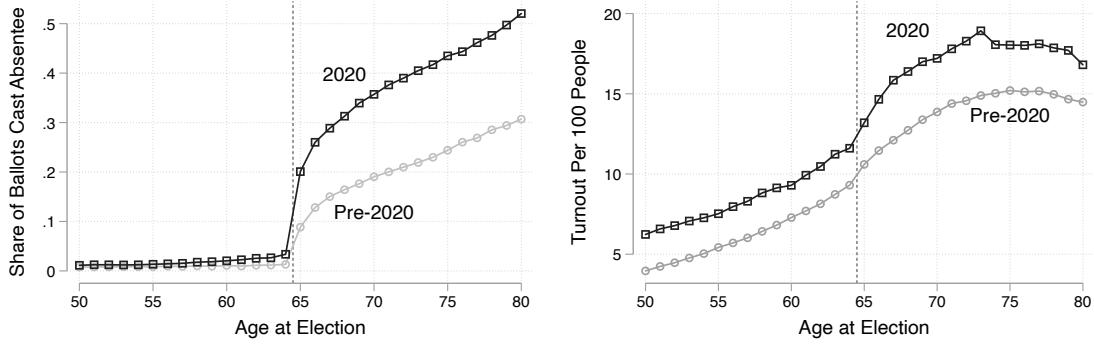
In this section, we estimate the effect of no-excuse absentee policies on turnout, and on vote mode, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.1 Graphical Evidence

First, we show graphical evidence that voters with access to no-excuse absentee used that vote mode at a much higher rate during the pandemic in 2020 than in previous elections. The left panel of Figure 1 shows the share of ballots cast that were absentee across age, separately for the 2010-2018 runoff elections (pre-COVID-19) and the 2020 runoff election (during COVID-19). As we see, 65 year olds did take advantage of being eligible to vote absentee in pre-COVID-19 elections, as previously documented in Meredith and Endter (2015): about 10% of ballots cast by 65 year olds in these elections were cast by absentee. In 2020, many more 65 year olds took advantage of the ability to vote absentee: about 23% of ballots cast by 65 year olds in the 2020 runoff election were absentee votes. This pattern shows that voters appreciate the opportunity to vote absentee, especially during the pandemic. It also strongly suggests that many 64 year olds would like to vote absentee but are not able to.

The right panel of Figure 1 shows that, both before and during the pandemic, having access to no-excuse absentee policies does not seem to drive large increases in overall turnout. 65 year olds, who are eligible to vote absentee without an excuse, vote at slightly higher rates than 64 year olds, who are not. But these differences are reasonably smooth across the 65 year old age threshold, meaning we can rule out very large overall turnout effects of no-excuse absentee policies. We evaluate the effect of no-excuse absentee policies on overall turnout more formally in the next section, and we find that the overall turnout effect of no-excuse absentee is positive, but modest.

Figure 1 – Absentee Voting and Turnout in Runoff Elections Across Age, Before and During COVID-19. 65 year olds who are eligible to vote absentee without providing an excuse are much more likely to vote absentee during COVID-19 than before.



3.2 Regression Evidence on Absentee Voting and Turnout

Table 1 presents our formal estimates of the effects of Texas’s no-excuse absentee policy on overall turnout and vote mode.²⁰ Column 1 reports the simple difference-in-differences estimate, comparing the difference in runoff turnout for 64 year olds and 65 year olds in 2020 to the average difference from five previous runoffs. We find that 65 year olds turned out more than 64 year olds in 2020, as they had in the average runoff before 2020, but this turnout gap did not grow very much in 2020: we estimate that the gap increased by 0.17 percentage points. In column 2, we extend this analysis by adjusting for idiosyncratic differences across counties and elections. We include county-by-year and county-by-age fixed effects, allowing us to make comparisons between 64 year olds and 65 year olds within the same county, meaning they will have more similar ballots. As in column 1, we find that the turnout gap between 65 year olds and 64 year olds only increases by a modest 0.27 percentage points in 2020.

In columns 3 and 4, we report a substantial increase in absentee voting in 2020 relative to previous years using the same regressions as in columns 1 and 2 but swapping absentee turnout for overall turnout. We find very similar estimates in both columns 3 and 4: absentee

²⁰To guard against concerns about possible divergent trends over time, we investigate parallel trends before 2020 in Appendix A.7. We also report a version of the main specification restricted to 2018 and 2020. These results leave our main conclusions unchanged.

Table 1 – Effect of No-Excuse Absentee Voting on Turnout and Vote Mode, Texas Primary Runoff Elections, 2010-2020.

	Overall Turnout Pr(Voted)[0-100%]		Absentee Voting Pr(Absentee)[0-100%]		Early In-Person Pr(Early)[0-100%]		Election Day In-Person Pr(Elec. Day)[0-100%]	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
No-Excuse (Age=65) $\times$ 2020	0.17 (0.10)	0.27 (0.10)	1.46 (0.04)	1.45 (0.04)	-0.94 (0.08)	-0.87 (0.08)	-0.35 (0.06)	-0.31 (0.06)
No-Excuse (Age=65)	1.42 (0.04)		0.80 (0.01)		0.37 (0.03)		0.26 (0.03)	
2020	2.23 (0.07)		0.27 (0.01)		3.10 (0.06)		-1.13 (0.04)	
Intercept	9.37		0.12		4.49		4.76	
# Obs	2,557,467	2,557,465	2,557,467	2,557,465	2,557,467	2,557,465	2,557,467	2,557,465
County-by-Year FE	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y
County-by-Age FE	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y

Robust standard errors in parentheses. Unit of observation is an individual by year. Texans aged 64 or younger who are eligible to vote must provide a valid excuse if they wish to vote absentee. Those aged 65 or older who are eligible to vote can vote absentee without an excuse. This analysis does not include Harris County due to its policy of mailing forms for absentee ballots to all registered voters 65 or over.

voting increased as a share of the population by 1.46 and 1.45 percentage points based on our regressions in columns 3 and 4, respectively.

Given the minimal change in the 65-64 turnout gap and the meaningful increase in 65-64 absentee voting gap, 65 year old voters must be switching away from in person voting methods more than their 64-year-old neighbors in 2020. As we show in columns 5-8, 65 year olds primarily switched from early in-person voting to absentee voting while the switch from election-day voting is more modest.

Overall, because the effect we estimate for 2020 relies on changes in just one election period, it is difficult to be certain how much of the jump we can attribute to COVID-19 versus other unobservable factors that changed in 2020. While the standard errors do not help us distinguish between the possible explanations for the jump, they do make us confident that the absentee voting effect was indeed larger in 2020 than for previous years.²¹ Despite this dramatic change in the mode of voting, we find no overall impact on turnout, suggesting that the dominant effect of absentee voting during the pandemic is to encourage voters to substitute from voting in person to voting more safely from their own homes.

²¹We use robust standard errors without clustering because our treatment assignment occurs at the individual level.

4 Neutral Partisan Effects of Absentee Voting

Having documented that the availability of no-excuse absentee voting during COVID-19 causes an extraordinarily large jump in absentee voting, driven mainly by substitution from in-person voting, we now examine partisan differences in these effects. As we discussed in the introduction, examining these partisan differences is important due to the national polarization around election administration and voting by mail, with the president casting doubt on voting by mail and encouraging Republicans not to use it, while Democrats have widely encouraged absentee voting. Does the opportunity to vote absentee skew the electorate in a Democratic direction? Is absentee voting advantaging Democrats during COVID-19?

The results suggest the answer is no. In Table 2, we present formal estimates of the potential consequences of the opportunity to vote absentee on actual electoral outcomes.²² As column 1 shows, there is a noticeable gap in the Democratic percentage of turnout at the threshold; that is, the share of the 65-year-old electorate in the 2020 runoff that is Democratic is roughly 1.3 percentage points higher than the share of the 64-year-old electorate that is Democratic.

However, in column 2, we see that this advantage for the Democrats hasn't actually grown during COVID-19; instead, it is roughly equal in size to the advantage for Democrats in the previous two (2016, 2018) runoff cycles. On the one hand, this suggests that the massive increase in Democratic absentee voting during COVID-19 has not advantaged the Democratic party electorally—65-year-old Republicans are simply voting more in person while 65-year-old Democrats are voting more by mail, a fact borne out by the evidence on vote mode in columns 3-8.

On the other hand, this does suggest that no-excuse absentee voting has increased overall Democratic turnout relative to Republican turnout over the past three runoff cycles in

²²As we mentioned earlier, we define party based on which party's runoff election the voter opted to vote in. In Texas, any voter may vote in a party's primary runoff election, with one exception: Texans who vote in the primary of one party are only able to vote in that party's primary runoff election (<https://www.sos.state.tx.us/elections/laws/advisory2018-15.shtml>).

Table 2 – Effect of No-Excuse Absentee Voting on Party Turnout, Texas Primary Runoff Elections, 2010-2020.

	Dem % of Turnout		Dem % of Absentee Ballots		Dem % of Early Ballots		Dem % of Elec. Day Ballots	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
No-Excuse (Age=65) $\times$ 2020	1.29 (0.36)	-0.16 (0.44)	13.93 (2.12)	7.68 (2.50)	-2.96 (0.48)	-3.58 (0.60)	-1.30 (0.62)	-1.83 (0.73)
No-Excuse (Age=65) $\times$ Year $\geq$ 2016		2.11 (0.35)		12.65 (2.84)		0.91 (0.49)		0.74 (0.51)
Intercept								
# Obs	269,348	269,348	18,076	18,076	132,609	132,609	118,376	118,376
County-by-Year FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
County-by-Age FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

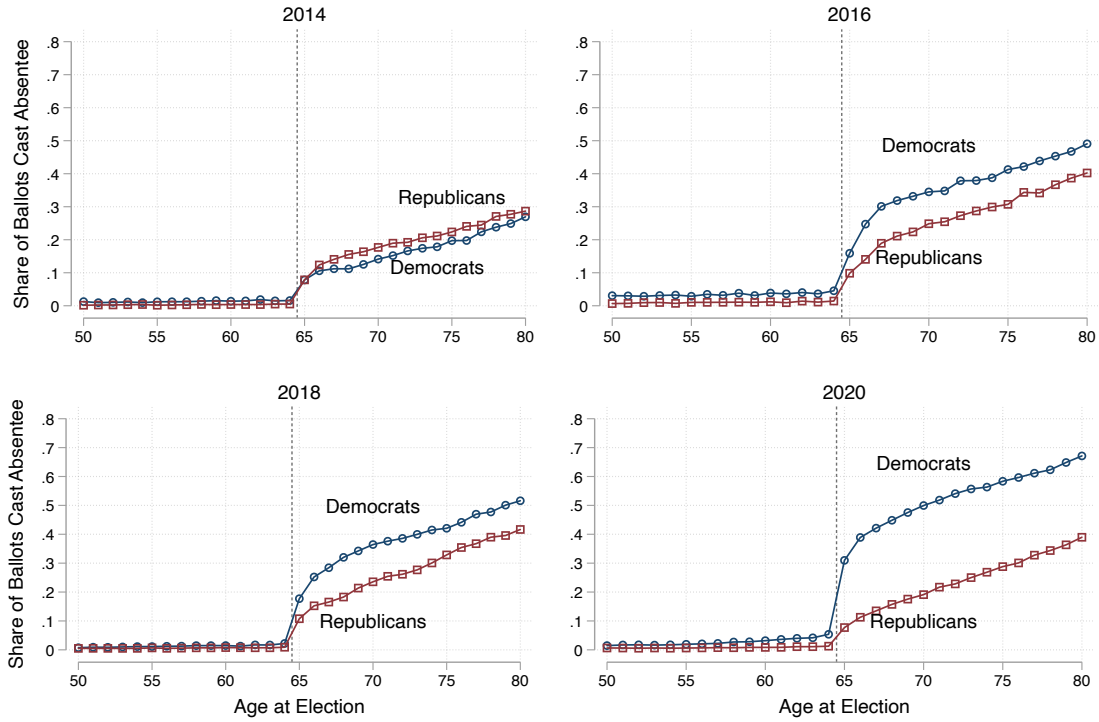
Robust standard errors in parentheses. Unit of observation is an individual by year. Texans aged 64 or younger who are eligible to vote must provide a valid excuse if they wish to vote absentee. Those aged 65 or older who are eligible to vote can vote absentee without an excuse. Party is defined by which party's primary runoff election the voter opted to vote in. This analysis does not include Harris County due to its policy of mailing forms for absentee ballots to all registered voters 65 or over.

Texas.²³ But when we look for this advantage in general and primary elections, we see no evidence for the partisan turnout gap: the 65-year-old electorate in primary elections and general elections is not more Democratic than the 64-year-old electorate, as we show in A.11 in the Appendix. Thus, whether this advantage in the runoffs is real or a statistical fluke is hard to say; in either case, it does not appear to generalize to general elections in Texas where having more members of your party voting has clear electoral and policy consequences.

In column 3, we show a large increase in the gap between 64 year olds and 65 year olds in the percent of all absentee ballots that are cast by Democratic voters. In Figure 2 below we illustrate this graphically, showing the rates of absentee voting as a proportion of all ballots cast, across age and party for the last four runoff primary elections. Although no partisan gap is present in 2014, a noticeable gap appears in 2016, with roughly 20% of ballots cast by 65-year-old Democrats being cast absentee while only roughly 10% of ballots cast by 65-year-old Republicans are cast this way. This partisan gap is unchanged in 2018, but in 2020, it more than doubles in size, with more than 30% of ballots cast by 65-year-old Democrats

²³In Appendix A.8, we confirm that the recent partisan turnout gap is not due to divergent trending between 64 and 65 year olds. We use birthdates reported on the voter file to zoom in on voters who, at the time of the election, were close to their 65th birthday, continuing to find evidence of a partisan turnout effect in recent runoff elections.

Figure 2 – Share of Ballots Cast Absentee, By Age and Party, 2014-2020 Runoff Elections. While a partisan gap in absentee voting is evident in 2016 and 2018, it has grown dramatically in 2020.



cast absentee while 65-year-old Republican absentee rates remain largely unchanged from past election cycles.

It is worth noting that the Texas Democratic Party launched a long-term strategic effort in 2016 to mail absentee ballot applications to Democratic seniors, which they claim nearly tripled the number of Democratic absentee votes by 2018.²⁴ However, the Texas Republican Party also reported organizing absentee ballot mailer campaigns around the same time, so it is unclear how much of the gap results from differences in party strategy versus differences in voter preferences.²⁵

Figure 2 makes it clear that some of this polarization in voting absentee arose prior to COVID-19. To formally test whether 2020 seems different than prior years when polarization was evident, in column 4 of Table 2, we add an additional interaction of the age 65 indicator

²⁴<https://www.texasdemocrats.org/blog/texas-democrats-path-to-victory/>

²⁵<https://www.texasgop.org/your-party-and-the-state-republican-executive-committee-have-been-busy/>

with an indicator for whether the year is 2016 or later. The coefficient in the first row of column 4 therefore estimates the additional growth in the gap in 2020, compared to 2016 and 2018. As we see, there is substantial growth in the Democratic share of absentee votes in 2020. Columns 5-8 show that this increase in the Democratic share of absentee voting in 2020 is coupled with a decline in the Democratic share of early in-person and Election Day voting, leading to neutral partisan effects on the overall electorate.

Taking a step back, the main conclusion of these analyses is that, while there is a high degree of partisan polarization in voting absentee during COVID-19, it does not alter the overall partisan balance of the voting electorate. Partisan polarization in the use of absentee voting is concerning in its own right, particularly due to the potential health consequences of voting in person, but on its own it does not translate into a partisan advantage so far as we can tell using our data from Texas.

5 Conclusion

Concerns about voting in person during an unprecedented global pandemic, whose spread is largely uncontrolled in the United States right now, have spurred a highly charged partisan debate over how to administer our November election. One of the biggest points of contention has been whether states should expand opportunities to vote absentee, and whether voters should take up this mode of voting if it's available. While the Democratic party has supported this shift, the Republican party, and most particularly President Trump, have opposed it, in part on the basis that it would advantage Democrats. We contribute to this debate by providing an analysis of the potential causal effects of expanding absentee voting on political participation during the pandemic.

Consistent with the prevailing wisdom of election administration experts, our results indicate that expanding opportunities to vote absentee leads to enormously high take-up rates during COVID-19. An important number of voters would like to vote absentee. Based

on our results, roughly 17% of 64-year-old Texans who voted in the runoff would have voted absentee if they could have—and presumably many more Texans under the age of 64 would have, too. While there are other considerations in the decision to expand absentee voting—including logistical challenges as well as voter faith in its security as a form of voting (Bryant 2020)—the revealed preference of voters for voting absentee during COVID-19 is important.

We have also documented a large potential increase in partisan polarization in voting absentee during COVID-19, but despite this increase, we do not find any change in the partisan composition of the electorate. Absentee voting in the July 14th Texas runoff did not lead Democrats to turn out at higher rates than Republicans, compared to past election cycles.

Looking beyond Texas and beyond this particular runoff, it is hard to know whether this pattern of neutral partisan effects of absentee voting will continue to hold. If there continues to be major polarization in the usage of absentee voting, this could alter the partisan composition of the electorate in two ways. On one hand, it could decrease overall turnout among Democrats, if logistical hurdles to implementing vote-by-mail leads many ballots to be rejected or otherwise uncounted.²⁶ On the other hand, in places where the main alternative to voting absentee is to vote in crowded polling places on Election Day, we suspect that adoption of absentee voting would be even higher, and that turnout would likely suffer among Republicans if, on average, they are less willing than Democrats to vote absentee.

Overall, although there are many logistical issues with extending absentee voting, it is important for states to continue considering these efforts given the high rate of usage by voters. Our results suggest that absentee voting is a popular option for voters that allows them to avoid the health risks of in-person voting without large effects on overall turnout and, at least for the election we study, it does not obviously change the partisan composition of turnout.

²⁶See <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/mail-voting-rules-key-swing-states-leave-ballots/story?id=72374784>

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Online Appendix

Intended for online publication only.

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A.1 Texas Absentee Ballot Application

Figure A.1 shows a sample absentee ballot in Texas. As section 5 of the form shows, valid reasons for voting by mail include being 65 years of age or older, a disability, expecting to be absent from one's county on Election Day, or confinement in jail.

Figure A.1 – Texas Absentee Ballot Application

DO NOT REMOVE PERFORATED TABS. Moisten here and fold bottom to top to seal. DO NOT REMOVE PERFORATED TABS. Moisten here and fold bottom to top to seal.

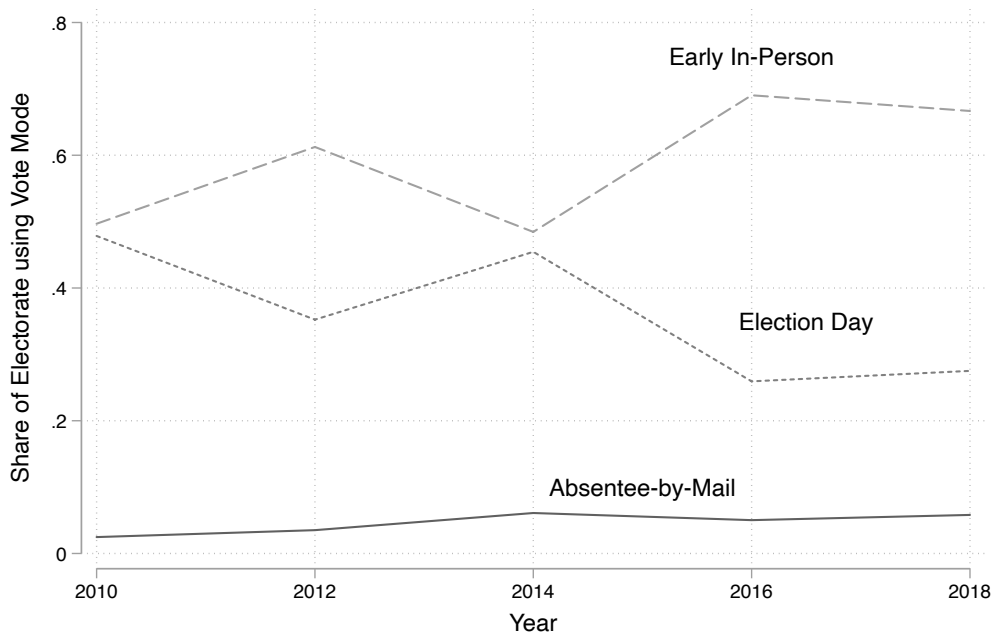
Application for Ballot by Mail		Prescribed by the Office of the Secretary of State of Texas AS-15 12/17		For Official Use Only VUID #, County Election Precinct #, Statement of Residence, etc.	
1	Last Name (Please print information)	Suffix (Jr., Sr., III, etc)	First Name	Middle Initial	
2	Residence Address: See back of this application for instructions.		City	, TX	ZIP Code
3	Mail my ballot to: If mailing address differs from residence address, please complete Box # 7.		City	State	ZIP Code
4	Date of Birth (mm/dd/yyyy) (Optional) [][]/[][]/[][][][]		Contact Information (Optional)* Please list phone number <u>and/or</u> email address: * Used in case our office has questions.		
5	Reason for Voting by Mail: ☐ 65 years of age or older. (Complete Box #6a) ☐ Disability. (Complete Box #6a) ☐ Expected absence from the county. (Complete Box #6b and Box #8) You will receive a ballot for the upcoming election <u>only</u> . ☐ Confinement in jail. (Complete Box #6b) You will receive a ballot for the upcoming election <u>only</u> .		7 If you are requesting this ballot be mailed to a different address (other than residence), indicate where the ballot will be mailed. See reverse for instructions. ☐ Mailing Address as listed on my voter registration certificate ☐ Address of the jail ☐ Nursing home, assisted living facility, or long term care facility ☐ Relative; relationship _____ ☐ Hospital ☐ Address outside the county (see Box #8) ☐ Retirement Center		
6a	ONLY Voters 65 Years of Age or Older or Voters with a Disability: If applying for one election, select appropriate box. If applying once for elections in the calendar year, select "Annual Application." ☐ Annual Application <u>Uniform and Other Elections:</u> ☐ May Election ☐ November Election ☐ Other _____ ☐ Any Resulting Runoff <u>Primary Elections:</u> You must declare <u>one</u> political party to vote in a primary: ☐ Democratic Primary ☐ Republican Primary		8 If you selected "expected absence from the county," see reverse for instructions [][][][]/[][][]/[][][][] — [][][][]/[][][]/[][][][] Date you can begin to receive mail at this address Date of return to residence address		
6b	ONLY Voters Absent from County or Voters Confined in Jail: You may only apply for a ballot by mail for one election, and any resulting runoff. Please select the appropriate box. <u>Uniform and Other Elections:</u> ☐ May Election ☐ November Election ☐ Other _____ ☐ Any Resulting Runoff <u>Primary Elections:</u> You must declare <u>one</u> political party to vote in a primary: ☐ Democratic Primary ☐ Republican Primary		9 Voters may submit a completed, signed, and scanned application to the Early Voting Clerk at: (early voting clerk's e-mail address) _____ (early voting clerk's fax) _____ NOTE: If you fax or e-mail this form, please be aware that you must also mail the form to the early voting clerk within four business days. See "Submitting Application" on the back of this form for additional information.		
10	"I certify that the information given in this application is true, and I understand that giving false information in this application is a crime." → X _____ Date _____ SIGN HERE If applicant is unable to sign or make a mark in the presence of a witness, the witness shall complete Box #11.				
11 See back for Witness and Assistant definitions. If applicant is unable to mark Box #10 and you are acting as a Witness to that fact, please check this box and sign below. ☐ If you assisted the applicant in completing this application in the applicant's presence or e-mailed/mailed or faxed the application on behalf of the applicant, please check this box as an Assistant and sign below. ☐ ★ If you are acting as Witness and Assistant , please check both boxes . Failure to complete this information is a Class A misdemeanor if signature was witnessed or applicant was assisted in completing the application.					
X _____ Signature of Witness /Assistant		X _____ Printed Name of Witness/Assistant		Witness' Relationship to Applicant (Refer to instructions on back for clarification)	
Street Address _____ Apt Number (if applicable) _____		City _____		_____	
State _____		ZIP Code _____		_____	

Este formulario está disponible en Español. Para conseguir la versión en Español favor de llamar sin cargo al 1.800.252.8683 a la oficina del Secretario de Estado o la Secretaría de Votación por Adelantado.

A.2 Vote Mode Descriptives in Texas

In this section, we show simple descriptive statistics on vote mode in Texas elections. First, in Figure A.2 we show the share of ballots cast in general elections by vote mode. As we can see, the most common vote mode in every general election in Texas since 2008 has been early in-person voting, where voters show up to a voting location on a day before Election Day to cast their ballot. Election Day voting has become slightly less common in Texas over time, as voters start to use early in-person voting at higher rates, as well as small increases in the use of absentee-by-mail voting over time. Early in-person voting in Texas is particularly common in Presidential election years.

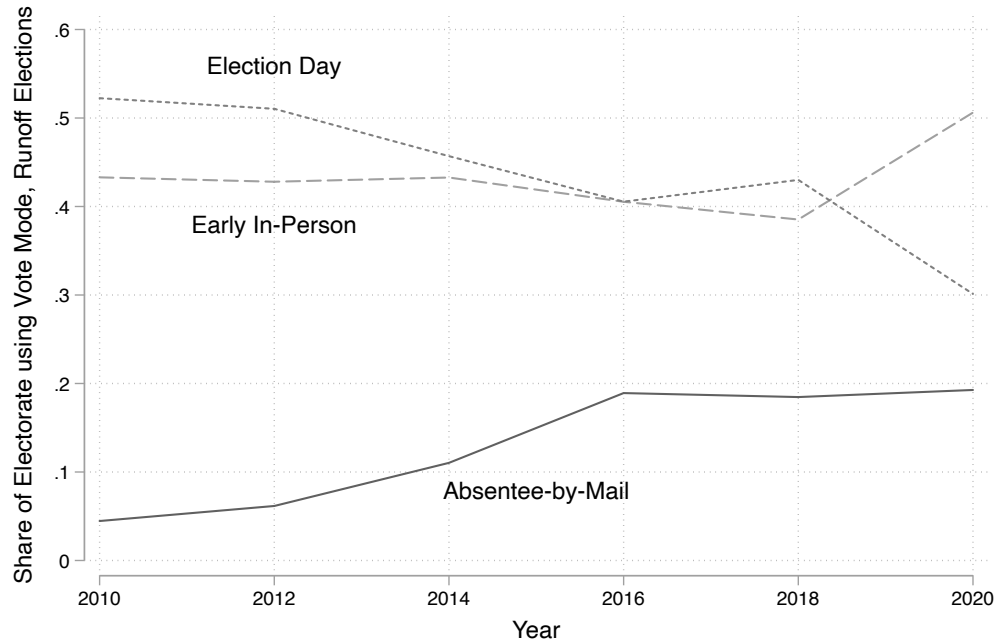
Figure A.2 – Texas Vote Mode Shares, General Elections The y-axis represents the share of general election votes cast using each voting method. The plot shows that the majority of votes cast in general elections in Texas have come from early in-person voting.



Next, in Figure A.3 we show the same plot but for primary runoff elections, the main set of elections we study in the paper. As a share of the electorate, Election Day voting is slightly more common in runoff elections compared to in general elections. In recent years, early in-person voting and Election Day voting were about equally as common. The share of voters using absentee-by-mail is also higher in runoff elections than in general elections, which is likely driven by the fact that older voters comprise a larger share of the electorate in runoff elections compared to general elections.

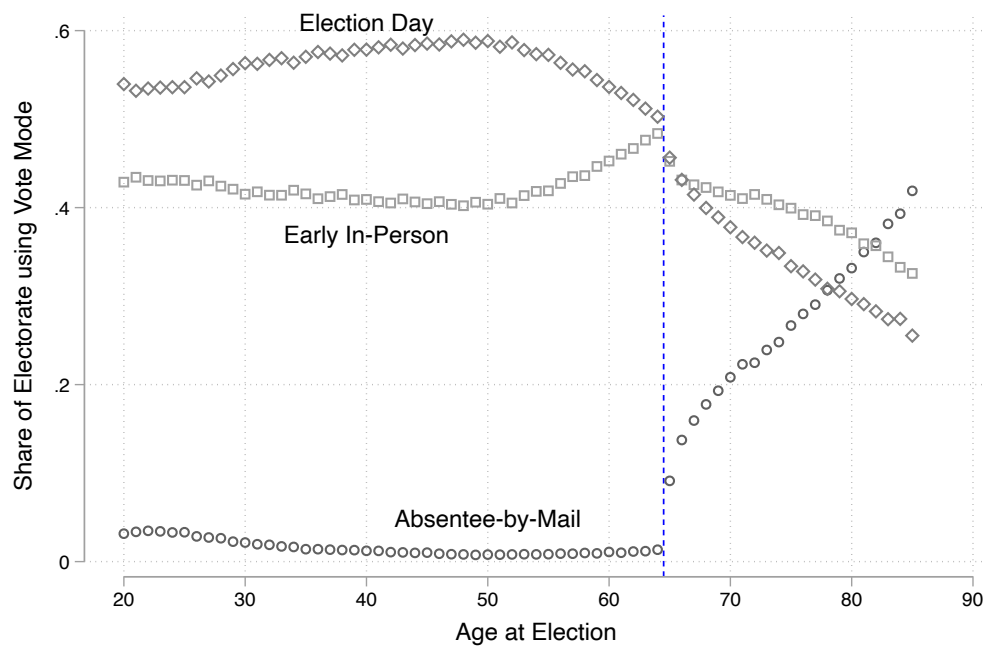
Finally, we show how vote modes in Texas vary with age. To do so, we pool together all runoff elections from 2008-2018 in Texas, and we plot the share of the electorate using each vote mode by voters' age on Election Day. As we can see, Election Day voting is the most common form of participation among voters under the age of 65. Voters 65 and older

Figure A.3 – Texas Vote Mode Shares, Runoff Elections The y-axis represents the share of runoff election votes cast using each voting method. The plot shows that early in-person and Election Day voting are about equally as common in runoff elections in recent years.



use early in-person voting more than Election Day voting, and the absentee-by-mail share increases dramatically with age once voters turn 65 and are eligible to vote absentee without an excuse. We interpret this plot as evidence that voters appreciate the opportunity to vote absentee-by-mail – 65 year olds are likely to substitute toward this convenience voting option and away from Election Day voting.

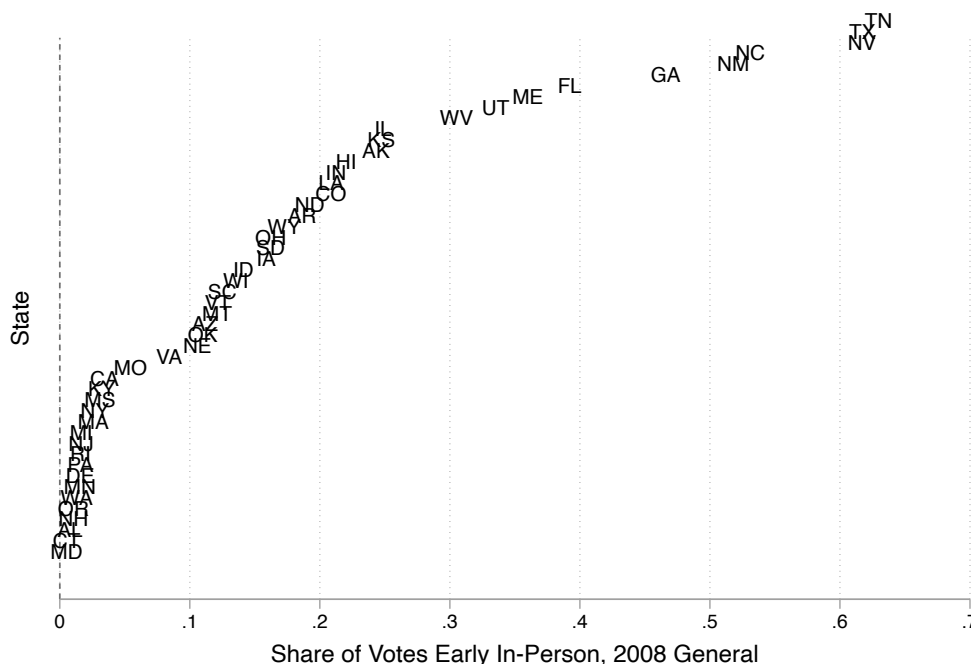
Figure A.4 – Texas Vote Mode Shares by Age, Runoff Elections (2008-2018). The y-axis represents the share of votes cast in runoff elections from 2008-2018 for each vote mode. Diamonds represent Election Day votes, squares represent early in-person votes, and circles represent absentee-by-mail votes. As the plot shows, the majority of ballots cast among younger age groups are Election Day votes, but early in-person voting remain quite common in runoff elections. Absentee-by-mail voting is very common among the oldest groups of voters.



A.3 Early In-Person Voting Frequency by State

In this section, we show how common voting early in-person is in each state. As we note in the main text, Texas is a state where early in-person voting is very common, and we suspect the effects of extending no-excuse absentee policies on turnout would be larger in states with fewer convenience voting options. Figure A.5 uses survey data from the 2008 Survey of the Performance of American Elections (Alvarez et al. 2009; Alvarez, Levin, and Sinclair 2012), which asks each respondent who voted in the 2008 general election to report their vote mode. Figure A.5 shows the share of voters in each state who report voting early in-person. As we see, early in-person voting is more common in Texas (over 60% of voters) than almost any other state.

Figure A.5 – Early In-Person Voting Share, by State The x-axis shows the share of votes cast in the 2008 general election that were reported as voting early in-person, and each point represents a state. As we see, early in-person voting is very common in Texas (TX), and is more common in Texas than nearly every other state.



A.4 No-Excuse Absentee Policies by State

In this section, we summarize each state’s planned absentee voting policy for the 2020 general election. As we show, eight states (Indiana, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, New York, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas) all currently plan to require an excuse to vote absentee in the 2020 general election. We caution that this list is current as of August 2020 but is subject to change; many states are currently debating legislation around absentee policies, and many of the recent changes in policy are the subjects of pending litigation.

Table A.1 – Review of Planned No-Excuse Absentee Policies for 2020 General Election. Universal Absentee refers to a policy where states mail every registered voter an absentee ballot application, in contrast to universal vote-by-mail, where each registered voter is sent a mail ballot by default.

State	Abbr.	2020 General Election Policy	State	Abbr.	2020 General Election Policy
Alabama	AL	No-Excuse	Montana	MT	No-Excuse ²⁷
Alaska	AK	No-Excuse	Nebraska	NE	No-Excuse
Arizona	AZ	No-Excuse	Nevada	NV	Universal Vote-by-Mail
Arkansas	AR	No-Excuse ²⁸	New Hampshire	NH	No-Excuse ²⁹
California	CA	Universal Vote-by-Mail	New Jersey	NJ	Universal Vote-by-Mail
Colorado	CO	All-Mail	New Mexico	NM	No-Excuse ³⁰
Connecticut	CT	Universal Absentee, No Excuse Required ³¹	New York	NY	Excuse Required
Delaware	DE	Universal Absentee, No Excuse Required	North Carolina	NC	No-Excuse
Florida	FL	No-Excuse	North Dakota	ND	No-Excuse
Georgia	GA	No-Excuse	Ohio	OH	Universal Absentee, No-Excuse Required
Hawaii	HI	All-Mail	Oklahoma	OK	No-Excuse
Idaho	ID	No-Excuse	Oregon	OR	All-Mail
Illinois	IL	Universal Absentee, No Excuse Required	Pennsylvania	PA	No-Excuse
Indiana	IN	Excuse Required	Rhode Island	RI	No-Excuse
Iowa	IA	Universal Absentee, No Excuse Required	South Carolina	SC	Excuse Required
Kansas	KS	No-Excuse	South Dakota	SD	No-Excuse
Kentucky	KY	No-Excuse ³²	Tennessee	TN	Excuse Required
Louisiana	LA	Excuse Required	Texas	TX	Excuse Required
Maine	ME	No-Excuse	Utah	UT	All-Mail
Maryland	MD	Universal Absentee, No Excuse Required	Vermont	VT	Universal Vote-by-Mail
Massachusetts	MA	Universal Absentee, No Excuse Required	Virginia	VA	No-Excuse
Michigan	MI	Universal Absentee, No Excuse Required	Washington	WA	All-Mail
Minnesota	MN	No-Excuse	West Virginia	WV	No-Excuse ³³
Mississippi	MS	Excuse Required ³⁴	Wisconsin	WI	No-Excuse
Missouri	MO	Excuse Required	Wyoming	WY	No-Excuse

²⁷Counties will have the option to conduct election by mail.

²⁸for individuals with COVID-19 concerns.

²⁹for individuals with COVID-19 concerns.

³⁰Counties authorized to send mail-in ballot applications.

³¹for individuals with COVID-19 concerns.

³²for individuals with COVID-19 concerns.

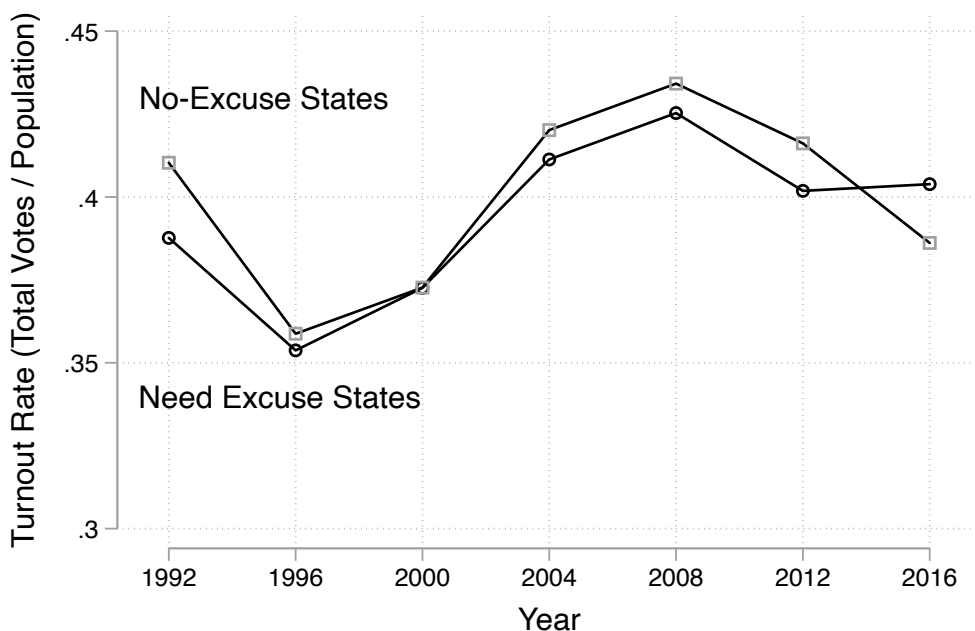
³³for individuals with COVID-19 concerns.

³⁴Can cite COVID-19 as excuse if under physician-ordered quarantine or caring for individual under quarantine.

A.5 Turnout Differences Between No-Excuse and Excuse Absentee States

In this section, we show how the turnout patterns of states that have, and have not, adopted no-excuse absentee policies differ. To do so, in Figure A.6 we plot the turnout rate over time, separately for states that do and do not have no-excuse absentee policies at some point during the time period. As the plot makes clear, states that have no-excuse absentee policies have slightly higher turnout in most years, with the exception of 2016. If we found that no-excuse absentee policies correlated with higher turnout using a statewide design, it could be that turnout was higher in no-excuse absentee states because they had more competitive races on the ballot, were more likely to be swing states, or any other omitted factor. In other words, it would be hard to know whether no-excuse absentee policies actually led to higher turnout using a statewide design. This illustrates the advantage of zooming into Texas, where we are able to hold the races on the ballot fixed by comparing 64 and 65 year olds within the same geography.

Figure A.6 – Turnout Rate over Time, No-Excuse Absentee vs. Need Excuse Absentee States The y-axis shows the turnout rate, as measured by the total number of votes cast in the general election divided by the total population. We show this separately for states that had no-excuse absentee policies at some point during the period and for states that required an excused to vote absentee throughout the whole period. No-excuse absentee states had higher turnout on average throughout the whole period, with the exception of 2016.



A.6 Summary of the Extant Literature on No-Excuse Absentee Effects

This section summarizes the literature to date on the effects of no-excuse absentee programs. Each row of Table A.2 is a study on the effects of no-excuse absentee policies on turnout. Each column summarizes information about that study, including its setting, research design, effect on overall turnout, and its effect on absentee turnout.

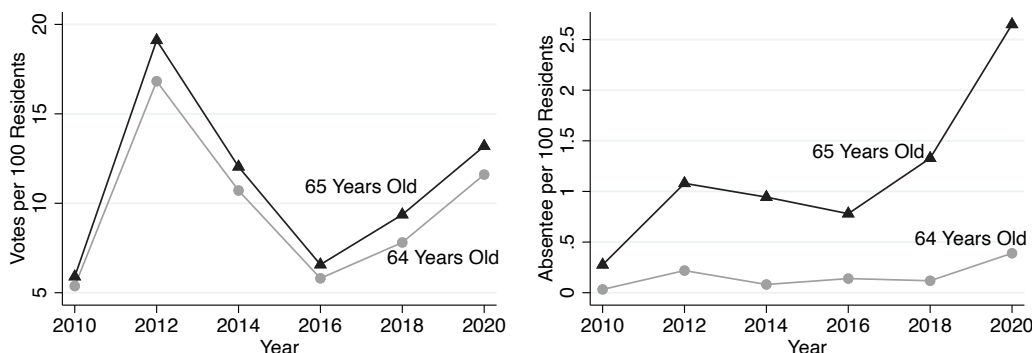
Table A.2 – Review of No-Excuse Absentee Effects Literature. X-Section (X-S) refers to a cross-sectional design, and DiD refers to a difference-in-differences design, and RDD refers to a regression discontinuity design.

Paper	Setting	Design	Unit	Treatment Level	Turnout Effect	Absentee Mode Effect
Oliver (1996)	US	X-Section	Individual	State	Null to Modest +	Large +
Karp and Banducci (2001)	US	X-Section	Individual	State-Year	Modest +	Large +
Francia and Herrnson (2004)	US	X-Section	St. Leg District	State	Modest +	
Fitzgerald (2005)	US	DiD	State-Year	State-Year	Null	
Gronke, Galanes-Rosenbaum, and Miller (2007)	US	Panel	State-Year	State-Year	Null	
Leighley and Nagler (2009)	US	Panel	State-Year	State-Year	Null to Modest +	
Giammo and Brox (2010)	US	Panel	County-Year	State-Year	Modest – to Modest +	
Larocca and Klemanski (2011)	US	Pooled X-S	Individual	State-Year	Modest +	
Leighley and Nagler (2011)	US	Panel	State-Year	State-Year	Modest +	
Springer (2012)	US	DiD	State-Year	State-Year	Null	
Burden et al. (2014)	US	Pooled X-S	Individual	State-Year	Modest – to Large –	
Burden et al. (2014)	US	DiD	County-Year	State-Year	Modest –	
Meredith and Endter (2015)	TX	RDD	Individual	Age Discontinuity	Null	Large +

A.7 Evaluating Trends in Turnout Among 64 and 65 Year Olds

In this section, we present graphical evidence supporting our identification strategy. 65 year olds are permitted to vote absentee without an excuse during our entire study period, and 64 year olds have always needed an excuse. We use a difference-in-differences design to study how COVID-19 changed the effect of this policy. This design only works if we can safely assume that 64 year olds and 65 year olds would have been on the same trend if COVID-19 had not occurred. We assess the plausibility of this assumption by plotting the turnout and absentee voting rates for both groups over time. We find that turnout and absentee voting rates move approximately in parallel for 64 year olds and 65 year olds over time, suggesting that our parallel trends assumption is plausible.

Figure A.7 – Trends in Turnout and Absentee Voting for 64 and 65 Year Olds.



Starting in 2017, Texas implemented two policies that might increase absentee turnout for voters over 65. The first law slightly extends the amount of time an absentee ballot can arrive after election day and still be counted.³⁵ The second law automatically sends election judges from each party to any assisted living facility with more than 5 absentee ballot requests so that any resident can fill out an application and vote absentee on the spot, even if they were not the ones who requested an absentee ballot.³⁶

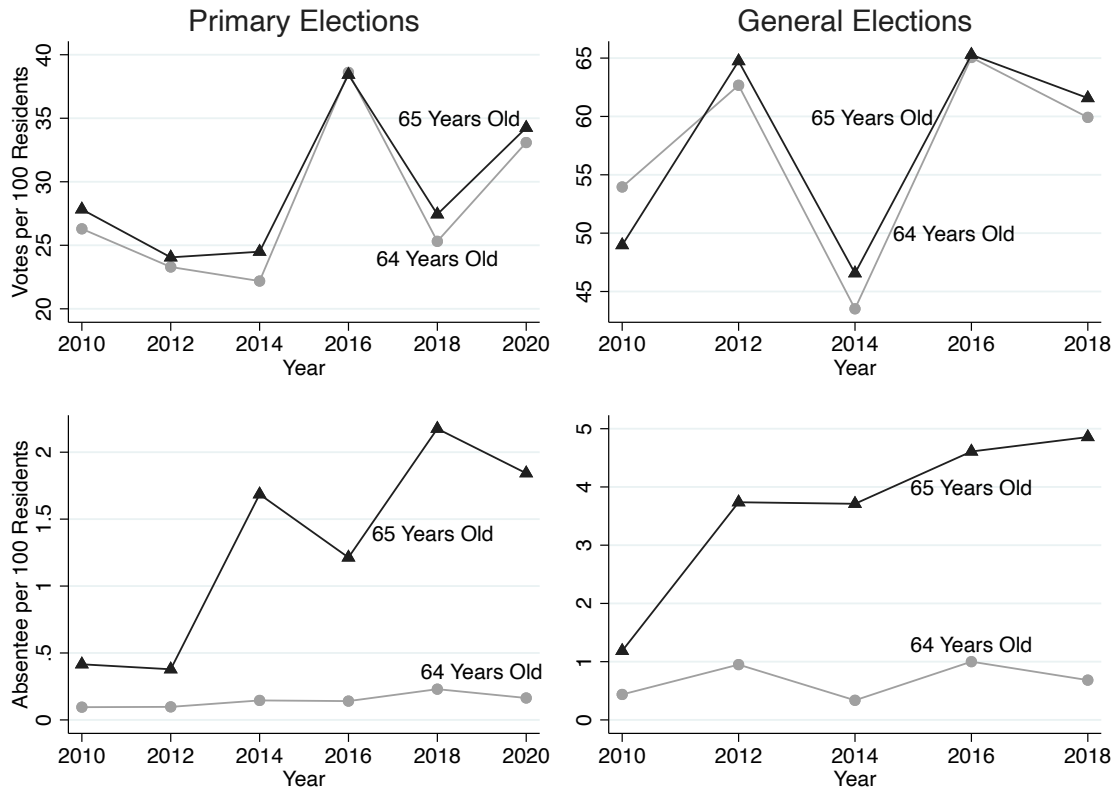
We address these potential threats to parallel trends in two ways. First, in Figure A.8 we report the trends in turnout and absentee voting for all general and primary elections between 2010 and 2020. The gap in turnout rates between 64 and 65 year olds in the 2018 general and post 2017 primaries looks similar to previous years consistent with parallel trends pre-treatment. The gap in absentee voting rates between 64 and 65 year olds increased in the 2018 primary, but declines in the 2020 primary. Absentee voting rates in the 2018 general election were in line with earlier general elections. While these laws may have had an effect on absentee voting rates, it is not so large as to dominate other changes across elections.

As a second check, we repeat our main analysis using only the period after the two laws were in place, and report the results in Table A.3. This amounts to a two-period

³⁵<https://capitol.texas.gov/billlookup/History.aspx?LegSess=85R&Bill=HB1151>

³⁶<https://www.capitol.state.tx.us/BillLookup/History.aspx?LegSess=85R&Bill=HB658>

Figure A.8 – Trends in Turnout and Absentee Voting for 64 and 65 Year Olds, Primaries and Generals.



difference-in-differences specification. As we can see, the magnitude of the effect of no-excuse absentee eligibility on turnout decreases further towards zero. The effect of no-excuse absentee eligibility on the share of ballots cast as absentee decreases in magnitude, but remains large and statistically significant. The same is true for the share of early ballots.

Table A.3 – Effect of No-Excuse Absentee Voting on Turnout and Vote Mode, Texas Primary Runoff Elections, 2018-2020.

	Pr(Voted)[0-100%]		Pr(Absentee)[0-100%]		Pr(Early)[0-100%]		Pr(Elec. Day)[0-100%]	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
No-Excuse (Age=65) $\times$ 2020	0.03 (0.12)	0.02 (0.12)	1.05 (0.04)	1.05 (0.04)	-0.71 (0.09)	-0.71 (0.09)	-0.30 (0.08)	-0.31 (0.08)
No-Excuse (Age=65)	1.56 (0.08)		1.21 (0.03)		0.14 (0.06)		0.21 (0.06)	
2020	3.80 (0.08)		0.27 (0.01)		3.77 (0.07)		-0.25 (0.05)	
Intercept	7.81		0.12		3.81		3.88	
# Obs	973,461	973,461	973,461	973,461	973,461	973,461	973,461	973,461
County-by-Year FE	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y
County-by-Age FE	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y

Robust standard errors in parentheses. Unit of observation is an individual by year. Texans aged 64 or younger who are eligible to vote must provide a valid excuse if they wish to vote absentee. Those aged 65 or older who are eligible to vote can vote absentee without an excuse.

A.8 Effects of No-Excuse Absentee Voting: Day-Level RD Analysis

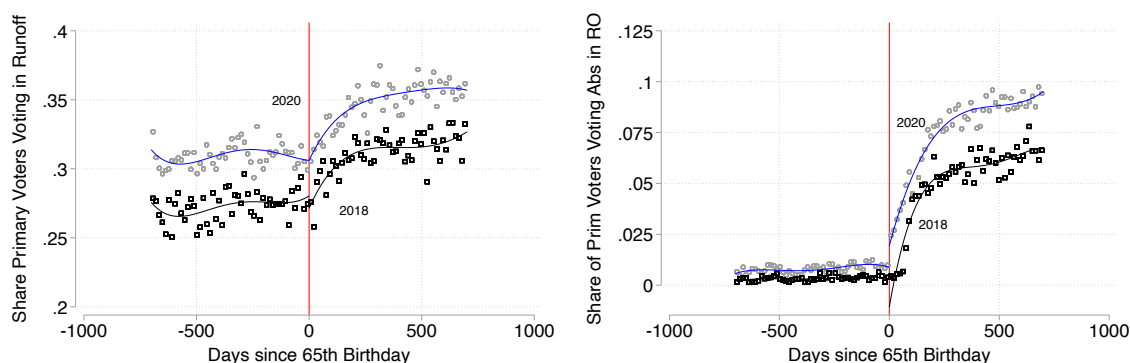
In this section, we present additional estimates of the effect of no-excuse absentee eligibility comparing individuals' age using their precise birthdate, rather than just age. This approach allows us to restrict the comparison at the eligibility cutoff to individuals very similar birthdates. Doing so allows us to alleviate concerns about potential underlying differences between 64- and 65-year olds. Since precise estimates of population by exact birthday are not available, we report our outcomes (turnout and absentee ballots in the primary runoff) as shares of all voters in the primary election in the same year.

The running variable in the regression discontinuity design expresses the number of days passed since an individual's 65th birthday at the day of the respective election. We restrict analyses in this section to individuals within 700 days of their 65th birthday. In the remainder of the section, we present graphical analyses in support of our main results using the Calonico, Cattaneo, and Titiunik (2014) approach and fitting a fourth-order polynomial.

A.8.1 Effects of No-Excuse Absentee Voting on Turnout and Absentee Share

Figure A.9 shows the share of primary voters close to their 65th birthday at the time of the election who cast a ballot in the run-off (left panel) and who specifically cast an *absentee* ballot in the run-off (right panel). Both results support our findings in the main paper. For overall turnout, there appears to be little change between 2018 and 2020 except for a higher base rate of turnout in 2020. In both election years, turnout gradually increases for voters after their 65th birthday, but does so at a very similar rate. This corroborates our result in the main paper that no-excuse absentee eligibility has no strong “special” effect on turnout in 2020. Turning to the right panel, we note a marked increase in the share of absentee ballots cast by primary voters in both years. The increase is much more pronounced in 2020 and, notably, starts right at the threshold: even voters who turned 65 right before the election were more likely to cast an absentee ballot. This result, too, bolsters our main finding that no-excuse absentee eligibility increases the share of absentee ballots cast, and does so particularly strongly in 2020.

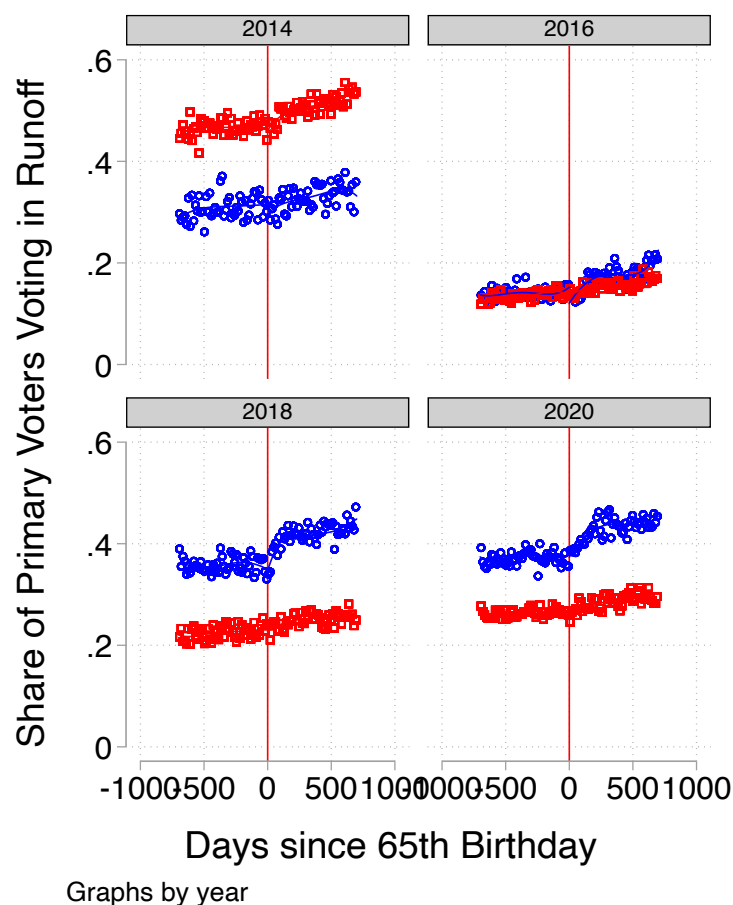
Figure A.9 – Share of Primary Voters Voting in the Runoff (left) and Casting an Absentee Ballot in the Runoff (right).



A.8.2 Effects By Party

Figure A.10 plots the share of primary voters close to their 65th birthday voting in the runoff by party and year. Note that the baseline of turnout in the runoff varies considerably by both party and year, which is due to the different composition of races in the runoff across elections. The day-level results replicate the finding that the increase in Democratic runoff turnout for voters after their 65th birthday only kicks in after the 2016 election, and is not unique to 2020.

Figure A.10 – Share of Primary Voters Voting in the Runoff, By Party.

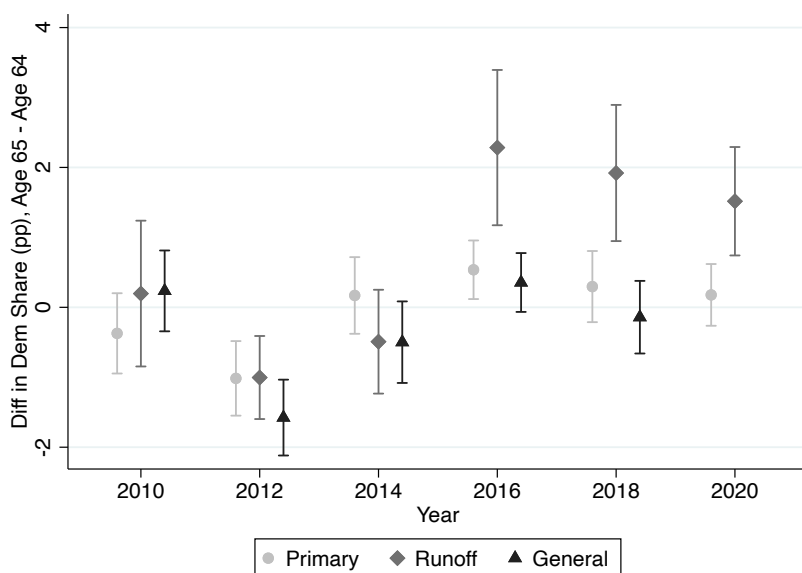


A.9 Effect Partisan Share of Turnout Across Different Election Types

As we discuss in Section 4, in 2016, 2018, and 2020, a larger share of the 65 year old electorate voted in the Democratic primary runoff than did 64 year olds. This tells us that expanding no-excuse absentee voting increases the number of people voting in a Democratic primary runoff relative to the Republican runoff, all else equal. Still, it is not clear whether that helps Democrats since these runoffs are selecting the party's candidate, not choosing who will hold office.

To determine whether either party clearly benefits from no-excuse absentee voting, we compare the effect on Democratic vote share across election years for all three main election types: generals, primaries, and runoffs. We report these estimates in Figure A.11. We find that, while no-excuse absentee increases the share of the electorate voting for Democrats in runoffs from 2016 to 2020, the effects in general and primary elections are statistically indistinguishable from zero except for in 2012 when no-excuse absentee benefited Republicans.

Figure A.11 – Difference Between Democratic Share of Turnout for 65 and 64 Year Olds in All General, Primary, and Runoff Elections Since 2010.



A.10 Effects of Mailing Absentee Ballot Applications

We have shown that no-excuse absentee policies increase absentee voting take-up during COVID-19, but have modest effects on overall turnout. But what about policies that mail absentee ballot applications to every registered voter? Throughout the 2020 primary season, many states chose to adopt this “universal absentee” policy, by which each registered voter receives an absentee ballot application by default.³⁷ Many states are currently considering a universal absentee policy for the 2020 general election, and at least 8 states are currently planning to use it in the fall (see Table A.2). By making it easier for inattentive voters to opt into voting absentee, this policy could change turnout more dramatically than normal absentee voting, which may mainly have the effect of encouraging already attentive voters simply to alter their mode of voting.

To study the effects of universal absentee policies, we take advantage of the fact that one county in Texas, Harris County (which contains the city of Houston), actually implemented a universal absentee policy for the July 14th runoff election. Harris County mailed every registrant over the age of 65 an absentee ballot application by mail, but did not mail the same application to voters 64 or younger.³⁸

In Table A.4 we replicate our main results from Table 1, but include an interaction of our treatment indicator ($\text{Age} = 65$ and $\text{Year} = 2020$) with an indicator for Harris County. The Harris County interaction in column 1, then, will tell us how much larger the 2020 turnout effect was in Harris County relative to non-Harris counties. Column 1 of Table A.4 shows that the 2020 overall turnout effect in Harris County was about 1.35 percentage points (summing the two coefficients in column 1), substantially higher than the 0.27 percentage point effect in non-Harris counties.

Table A.4 – Effect of Universal Absentee Policies on Turnout, Texas Primary Runoff Elections, 2010-2020.

	Pr(Voted)[0-100%]	Pr(Absentee)[0-100%]	Pr(Early)[0-100%]	Pr(Elec. Day)[0-100%]
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
No-Excuse ($\text{Age}=65 \times 2020$)	0.27 (0.10)	1.45 (0.04)	-0.87 (0.08)	-0.31 (0.06)
Universal Absentee ($\text{Age}=65 \times 2020 \times \text{Harris}$)	1.08 (0.24) [0.150]	2.70 (0.12) [0.025]	-1.05 (0.17) [0.875]	-0.58 (0.14) [0.875]
# Obs	3,007,845	3,007,845	3,007,845	3,007,845
County-by-Year FE	Y	Y	Y	Y
County-by-Age FE	Y	Y	Y	Y

Robust standard errors in parentheses. Unit of observation is an individual by year. Texans aged 64 or younger who are eligible to vote must provide a valid excuse if they wish to vote absentee. Those aged 65 or older who are eligible to vote can vote absentee without an excuse, and in Harris county were all mailed an absentee ballot application in 2020. Brackets indicate one-sided p-values from a permutation test of each county interaction for counties with population greater than 100,000. For example, about 15 % of counties had a larger overall turnout effect in 2020 than Harris county.

It is difficult to know how much of this turnout effect in 2020 in Harris County should be attributed to the universal absentee policy versus other specific factors to Harris County that may have led 65 year olds to turn out at higher rates than 64 year olds, as the estimate relies

³⁷This policy stops short of universal vote-by-mail, where each registrant is mailed an actual ballot by default.

³⁸See <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/houston-texas/houston/article/Harris-County-Democrats-had-record-turnout-in-15411656.php>

on a policy change in just one county. In brackets in column 1, we report a one-sided p-value from a permutation test, where we estimate this interaction effect for every Texas county with a population greater than 100,000. We find that about 15% of counties in Texas had larger 2020 turnout effects than Harris County. Given that the turnout effect we observe in Harris County is not a strong outlier, we caution against reading too much into this estimate as evidence that the universal absentee policy was what drove the turnout increase in Harris County.

In column 2 of Table A.4, we show that the eligibility to vote no-excuse absentee dramatically increased the 2020 absentee voting rate in Harris County relative to other counties. Summing the coefficients in column 2, no-excuse absentee eligibility increased the absentee voting rate by over 4 percentage points. The value in brackets in column 2 shows that less than 3% of counties had larger effects on absentee voting in 2020 and—coupled with the declines in early and Election Day voting in columns 3 and 4—suggests that, at the very least, universal absentee policies help facilitate substitution toward more health-preserving voting modes over and above simple no-excuse absentee policies.³⁹

³⁹The two counties with larger 2020 absentee voting rate effects than Harris County were Travis county, and its neighboring Hays county. This may be explained by the Travis county clerk’s vocal public support of voters switching to absentee voting in 2020 (see <https://www.austinchronicle.com/news/2020-05-08/travis-county-clerk-lays-out-her-july-election-plan/>).

A.11 Statewide Races in Texas Primary Runoffs

In this section, we simply enumerate the set of statewide races that appeared on the ballot in each Texas primary runoff from 2010 to 2020.

Table A.5 – Statewide run-off races, by party.

Year	Democratic	Republican
2010	-	-
2012 ⁴⁰	U.S. Senate	U.S. Senate
2014 ⁴¹	U.S. Senate	TX Attorney General TX Lieutenant Governor
2016 ⁴²	-	-
2018 ⁴³	TX Governor	-
2020 ⁴⁴	U.S. Senate	-

⁴⁰<https://www.sos.state.tx.us/elections/forms/enrrpts/2012%20democratic%20-primary-runoff.pdf> and <https://www.sos.state.tx.us/elections/forms/enrrpts/2012-republican-primary-runoff.pdf>

⁴¹<https://elections.texastribune.org/texas-election-results/2014-runoff-election/>

⁴²<https://elections.texastribune.org/2016/primary-runoff-election-results/>

⁴³<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/05/22/us/elections/results-texas-primary-runoff-elections.html>

⁴⁴<https://candidate.texas-election.com/Elections/getQualifiedCandidatesInfo.do>