

New Electorate Study

How Do Californians Want to Cast their Ballots During the COVID-19 Crisis?

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RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How do Californians of all demographic groups want to cast their ballots during the COVID-19 pandemic, what changes to the electoral process will they demand and support during this critical moment, and how will reforms made in 2020 reshape our state's electorate in the future? By analyzing a statewide survey of a diverse sample of 12,276 eligible voters (adult citizens) conducted April 8-22, 2020, we ask:

1. Do members of California's electorate prefer to vote in person or through mail ballots this November, what social distancing measures are necessary to make them comfortable at the polls, and what is their level of support for different policy approaches to administering the 2020 election?
2. How do members of California's diverse racial and ethnic groups view the 2020 election when it comes to their most favored method of casting a ballot, their level of comfort with in-person voting options, their confidence in the integrity of elections, and their support for different policy options?
3. How do these preferences change when Californians are presented with different potential scenarios, grounded in scientific projections, about when the pandemic is likely to peak: either in the spring of 2020 or in the fall, as the November election approaches?

KEY FINDINGS

Just over half (52%) of California eligible voters prefer to mail in their ballot in the upcoming election, while another 18% prefer to use a mail ballot but drop it off at a vote center or drop box. As a whole, California's eligible voters plan to vote by mail more than ever before in November 2020. Voting by mail is the method that gives them the most confidence in the integrity of election results, and they are strongly supportive of policies that expand access to voting by mail.

The level of support for voting by mail differs across California's diverse racial and ethnic groups. Consistent with past studies, our survey found that Latino and African-American eligible voters are generally less likely to prefer this method of voting than non-Latino whites and Asian Americans. It will be important to consider the potentially disparate impacts that any election administration changes could bring and to conduct broad outreach efforts.

When presented with scientific projections predicting a fall peak in the impact of COVID-19, eligible voters were even more likely to prefer voting by mail and to express concerns about waiting in line or working at a polling place that did not adhere to social distancing protocols. Specifying a set of social distancing guidelines for in-person voting resolved these concerns for many eligible voters of all types.

BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH APPROACH

With the COVID-19 pandemic dramatically disrupting everyday life in California and across the nation, state and local elections officials are seeking to adapt the way that they administer elections to ensure the safety of voters and their workers, while still securing access to the ballot and the integrity of elections. [Sixteen states](#) have delayed their presidential primary elections because of the public health crisis, while two US senators have [introduced legislation](#) to expand voting by mail and adopt other new procedures in November's presidential contest. Leading election law scholars have advanced proposals to expand voting by mail and to make elections accessible, and President Trump himself has weighed in on the topic.¹

California's public officials and county election administrators now face the challenge of holding safe and accessible elections during a public health crisis. Fifteen of these counties, in which more than half of the state's registered voters reside, will be doing so while administering the Voter's Choice Act, a new law that directs participating counties to mail every registered voter a vote-by-mail ballot which the voter can mail in, drop off at a secure ballot box, or drop off at a newly established Vote Center. In other counties, voters traditionally have had the option of choosing to receive a mail ballot or voting at a neighborhood polling place. How will election procedures in either type of county need to adapt to the challenges posed by COVID-19? Governor Gavin Newsom's May 8 executive order requires all counties to send all registered voters a vote-by-mail ballot in November.

To bring the voices of members of the electorate into this vital policy conversation, we conducted parallel surveys of eligible voters in California and in the nation overall in April, 2020. We conducted each survey online, recruiting our sample through the online platform Lucid Fulcrum Exchange. This platform connects researchers to panels of respondents who have already provided their demographic information, making it possible for us to draw diverse samples that reflect the key characteristics – race, ethnicity, age, gender, and education levels – of our state and nation's citizen voting age populations. In analyses of the national survey, our team of scholars has shown that eligible voters in America have become strongly [supportive of vote-by-mail options](#), but find that there is an emerging [partisan divide](#) on these reforms.

In California, we focus on how eligible voters would like to see the November election run and how these views may change given different scenarios for the COVID-19 outbreak. We surveyed an especially large sample of eligible voters – 12,276 respondents – in order to gauge the perspective of members of the state's largest racial and ethnic groups. This large sample will also allow us to study key counties in future analyses. We fielded the survey from April 8-22, recording the views of a diverse sample in which 47.7% of respondents are white (non-Latino), 28.5% are Latino, 15.5% are Asian-American, and 9.2% are African-American (these numbers total 100.9% because some Latinos are members of other racial groups). Each of these figures are within 0.1 to 2.3 percentage points of the estimates for the state's citizen age voting population reported by the [United States Census Bureau](#). To further ensure that our findings reflect that population, we created survey weights based on the demographic characteristics of that population and report all results using those weights.

Because officials must plan to hold an election without knowing exactly how severe the COVID-19 crisis will be in the fall, we designed our survey to measure public opinion under different scenarios for the pandemic. We randomly divided our respondents into three groups. We presented two of these groups with truthful summaries of the projections of two widely-cited teams of scientists, with one team projecting a peak of the public health crisis in the spring of 2020 and the other projecting that its impact will peak in the fall if social distancing measures are relaxed at that time. The third group did not read any projections from us. (At the end of the survey, we provided all respondents with information about both sets of projections, including links to the scientific reports underlying them produced by the University of Washington and the other at Imperial College London.) Because the groups were divided randomly, any differences in their views on the elections can be attributed to the projections that they read. As policymakers learn more about the timing of the pandemic's largest impacts, this approach can help inform them about the preferences of eligible voters under different scenarios. The projections we presented to respondents are below:

1. The **spring peak** scenario: “While no one can be certain how the COVID-19 outbreak will progress in the United States, one well-respected team of scientists at a leading university has projected that if social distancing measures are widely adopted, the effects of the virus will reach their peak in April, then gradually decline throughout the spring and into the summer.”
2. The **fall peak** scenario: “While no one can be certain how the COVID-19 outbreak will progress in the United States, one well-respected team of scientists at a leading university has projected that if social distancing measures are widely adopted now but are lifted during the early fall, a new surge in cases will come and the effects of the virus will reach their peak in November or December.”

HOW DO CALIFORNIANS WANT TO CAST THEIR OWN BALLOTS?

We present how our diverse sample of California's eligible voters prefer to cast their ballots in November in Figures 1 and 2. As with all of our pairs of figures, the first one reports how respondents overall answered a given question along with breakdowns that report the responses of those who read the “spring peak” and “fall peak” scenarios and those in the control condition, who did not read any projections. In the second figure, we break down responses by the state's largest racial and ethnic groups, ordered according to the percentage of the citizen voting-age population that they represent. Each column gives the percentage of a group answering the question a certain way, with the error bars around it representing the margin of error.

On the key question of how respondents would most prefer to cast their ballot, we found that overall 51.7% said that they would prefer to vote by mailing in their ballot. Another 18.9% selected the option of dropping off a ballot that had been automatically mailed to them a month before election day. Combining these two figures, a total of 70.6% of voters overall preferred to cast a ballot that has been mailed to them, far higher than the 57.8% of California voters who either mailed in or dropped off a mail ballot in the [2016 presidential election](#). It appears that the COVID-19 crisis has led Californians, who have long-voted by mail at a relatively high rate, to embrace this option even more. Further evidence that suggests this shift is related to the public health crisis comes from our scenarios, where preferences to vote by mail were highest among those who read projections about a fall peak (53.4%) or a spring peak (51.9%), compared with the 49.7% preference among those who were not exposed to a COVID-19 projection.

1 See Richard L. Hasen, 2020 “Trump is Wrong About the Dangers of Absentee Ballots,” Washington Post, April 9, 2020, Nathaniel Persily and Charles Stewart III, 2020, “Ten Recommendations to Assure a Healthy and Trustworthy 2020 Election,” Lawfare.com, March 19, 2020.

Figure 1. Personal Preferences on How to Cast a Ballot

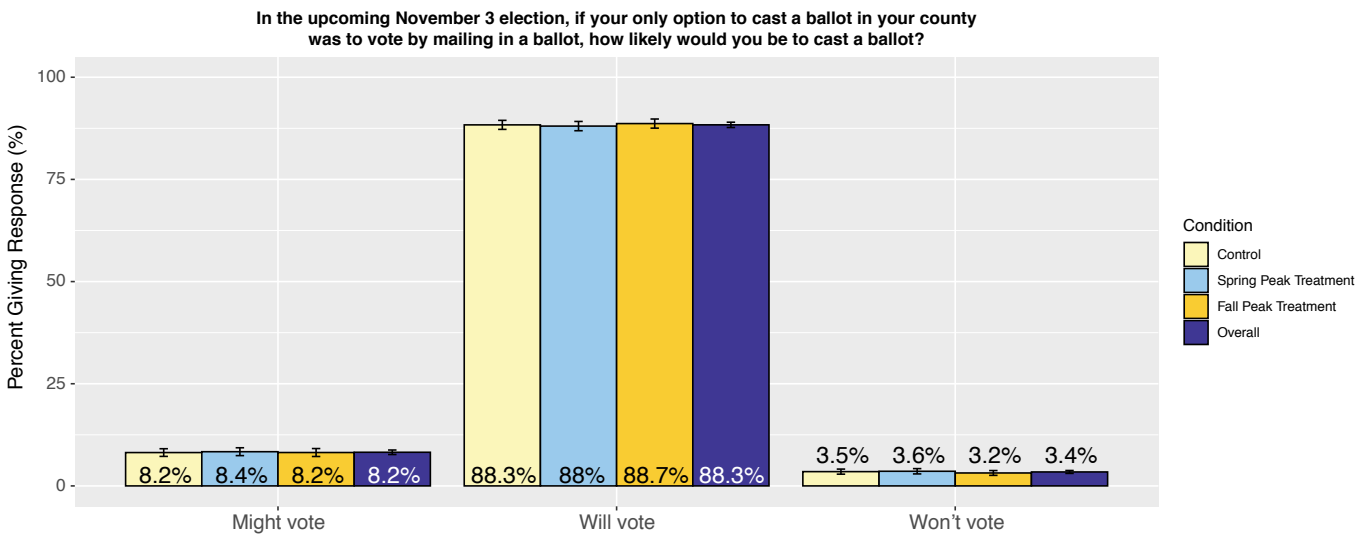
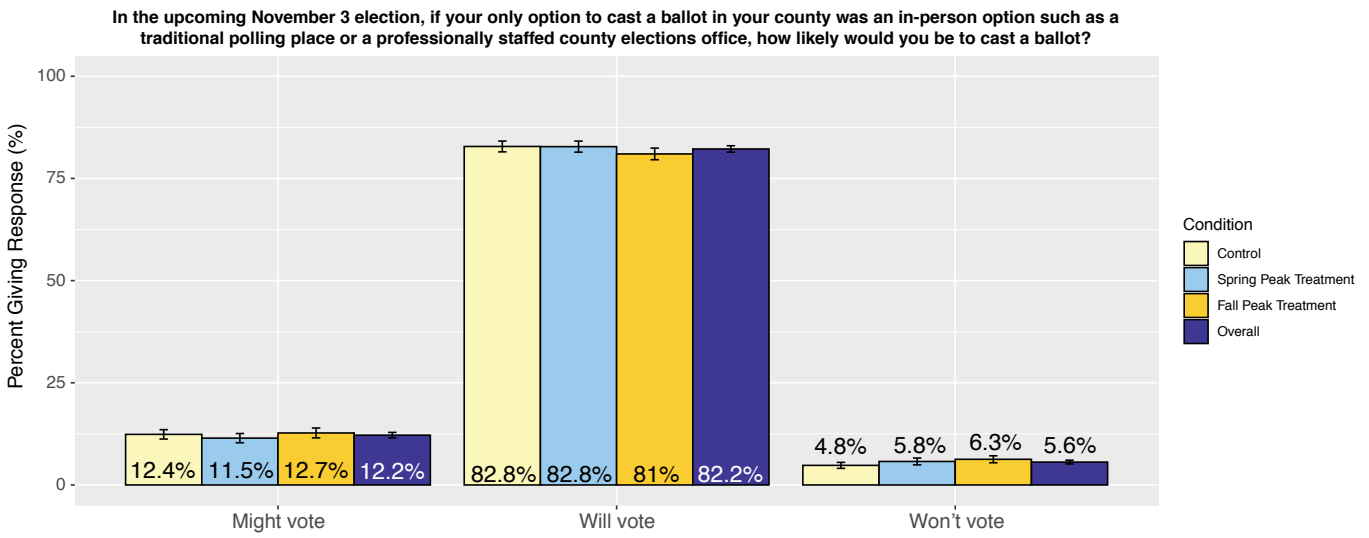
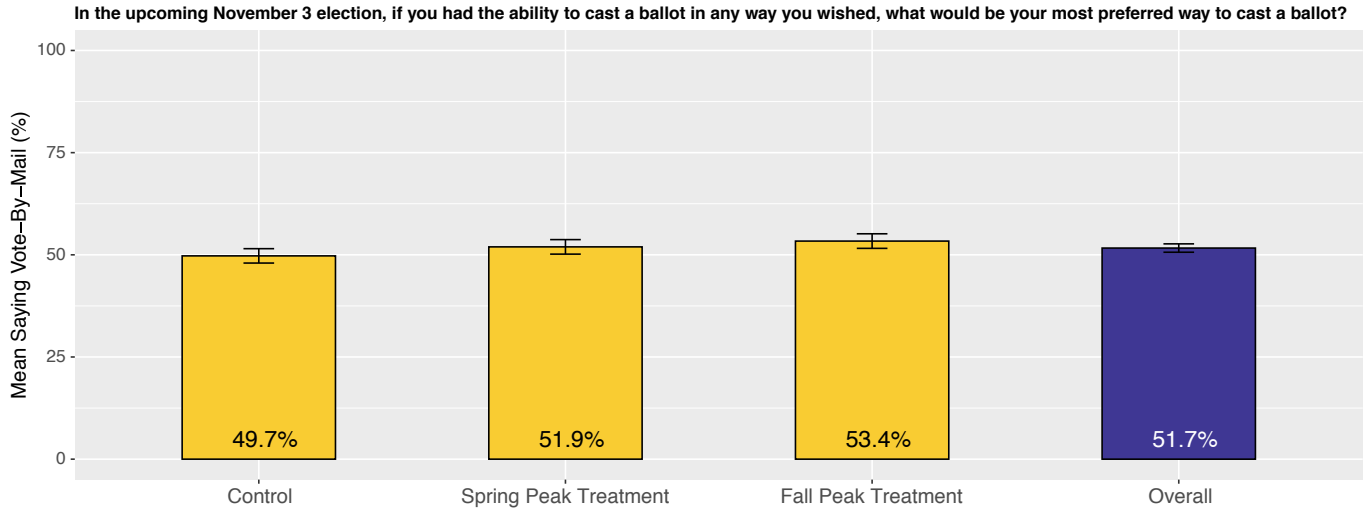
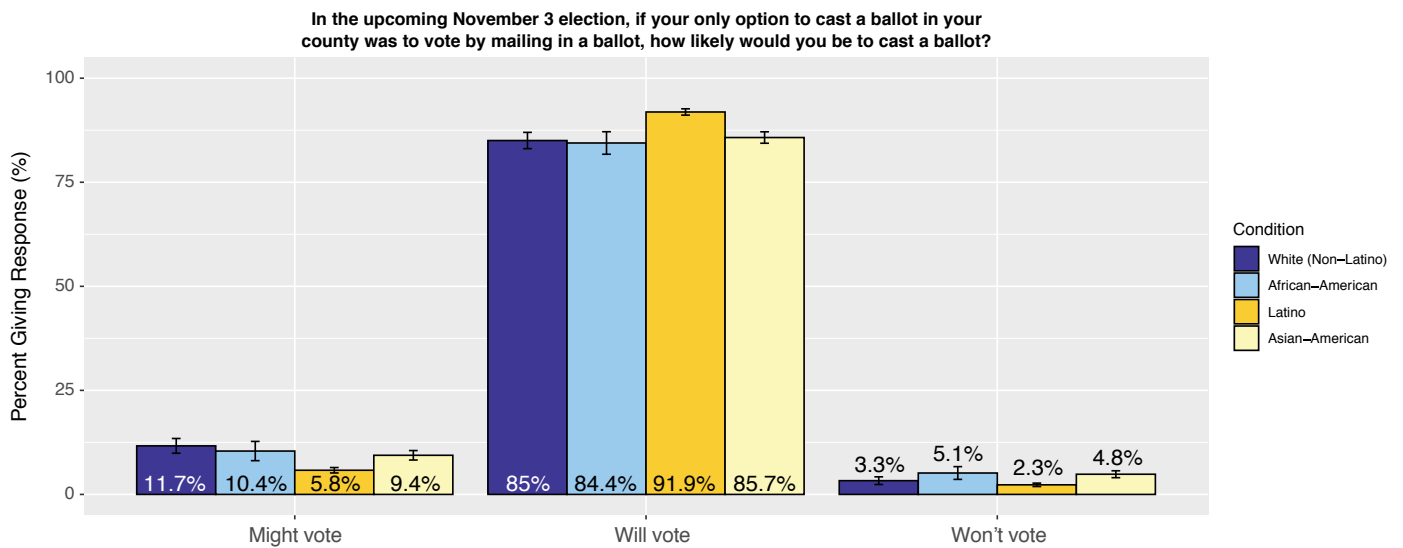
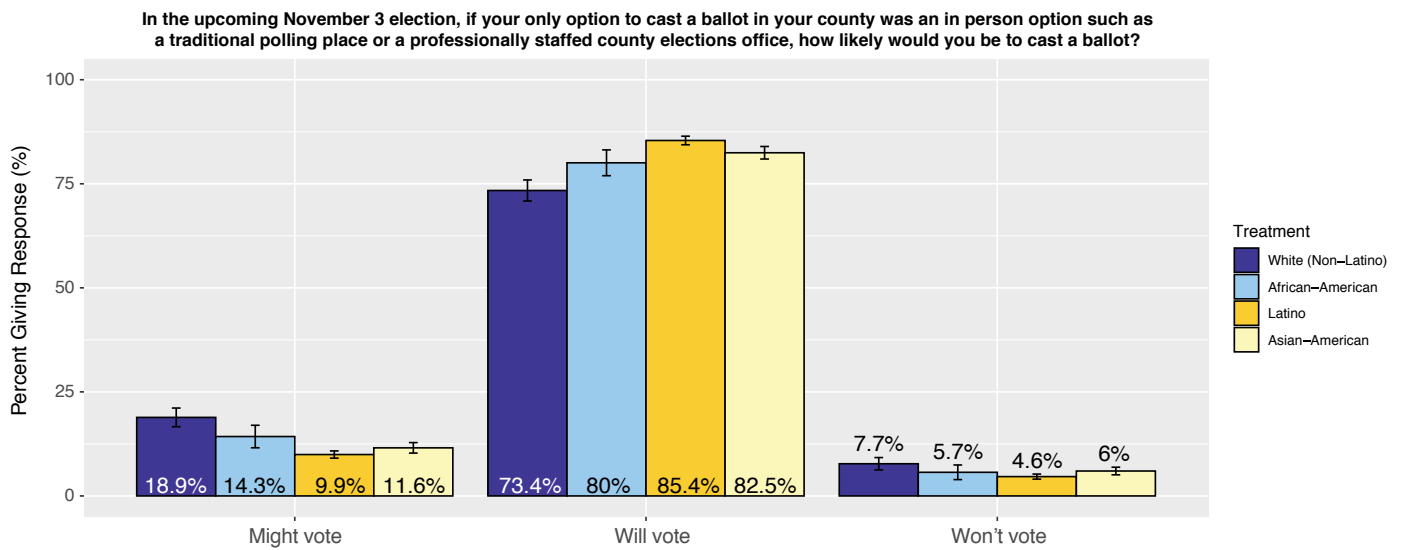
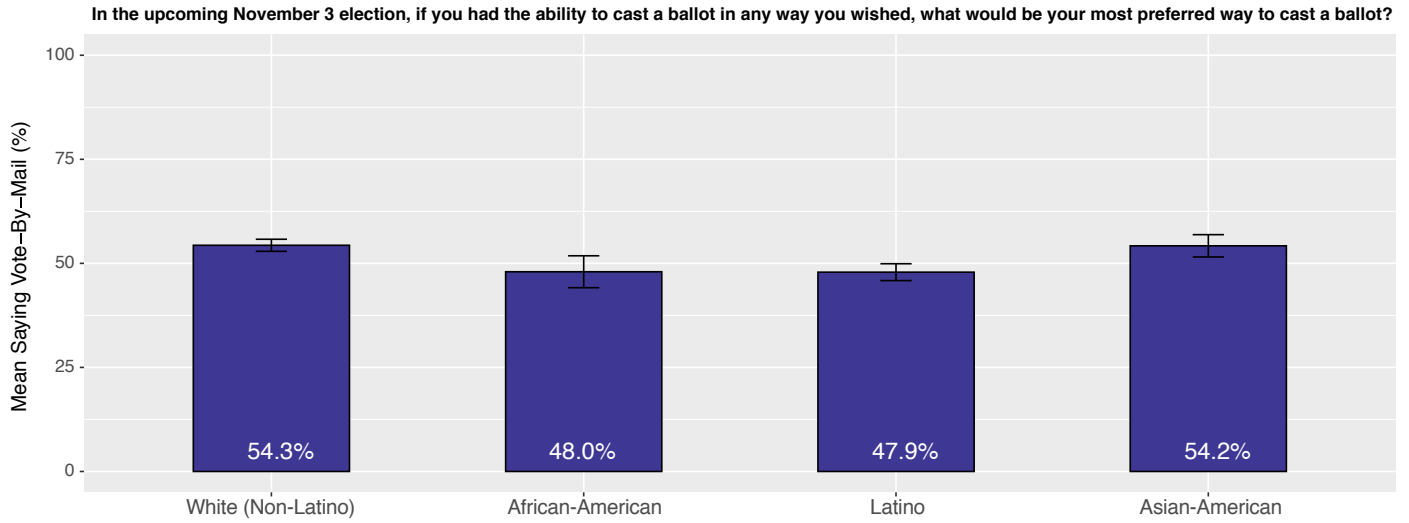


Figure 2. Personal Preferences on How to Cast a Ballot, by Race and Ethnicity



We also asked respondents whether they were likely to cast a ballot in November if voting in person was their only option and, subsequently, if voting by mail was their only option. For both questions, we removed from our analysis those who had, earlier in the survey, indicated that they “definitely” or “probably” would not vote in November, in order to focus on the plans of potential voters. Overall, 5.6% responded that they would not vote if an in-person option was their only way to cast a ballot, with this rate being higher under the two COVID-19 scenarios. Looking at the last question, 3.4% overall reported that they would not vote if a mail ballot was their only option. Given California’s large voter population, with 25.3 million eligible voters and 20.7 million registered voters [statewide](#), these small percentages translate to hundreds of thousands of eligible voters who would be left out of the election. It will be important for state and local elections officials to conduct a major outreach effort designed to connect with those who prefer in-person voting options in order to keep them in California’s active electorate.

Figure 2 breaks these questions down by racial and ethnic groups. Consistent with studies of voting in our state from 2002-2012 conducted by USC’s [California Civic Engagement Project](#), we find significant differences in preferences with 54.3% of non-Latino whites and 54.2% of Asian-American eligible voters selecting voting by mail as their top option, compared with 48.0% of African Americans and 47.9% of Latinos. These differences suggest that if any voting options are made completely unavailable to eligible voters, such changes could have a disparate impact across groups. When we asked likely voters whether they planned to cast a ballot if voting in person was their only option, 7.7% of non-Latino whites, 6% of Asian Americans, 5.7% of African Americans, and 4.6% of Latinos said that they would not vote. When we asked if they would vote if a mail ballot was their only option, 5.1% of African Americans, 4.8% of Asian Americans, 3.3% of non-Latino whites, and 2.3% of Latinos responded that they would not vote.

We also asked voters about their comfort levels with waiting in line at a polling place or working as a poll worker, either with or without social distancing measures implemented at the polling place. As Figure 3 shows, when we asked about comfort levels at polling places that did not implement social distancing, only half of those surveyed said that they would be comfortable waiting in line. This figure was even lower, 46.5%, for those presented with the “fall peak” scenario. Similarly, only 35.7% of respondents overall would feel comfortable being a poll worker in a precinct without social distancing, with this figure even lower, 32.2%, when a fall peak in the COVID-19 outbreak was projected. Notably, eligible voters became much more comfortable with waiting in lines (68.7%) or working at a polling place (47.4%) which adhered to a social distancing protocol, based on a set of recommendations provided by the [NAACP](#). Finally, respondents in every group were much more comfortable (83.9% overall) with dropping off their ballots at a drive-through location that followed to social distancing, a method of casting or delivering ballots used in some states and counties.

Figure 4 reveals some important differences across racial and ethnic groups in average levels of comfort with in-person voting. Latino respondents were the most comfortable with waiting in line at a polling place that did not adhere to social distancing protocols (62%) and to being a poll worker in these conditions (53.6%). By contrast, Asian Americans were the least comfortable with waiting in line (36.3%) or working as a poll worker (22.7%) in the absence of social distancing. Average comfort levels by African-American and white respondents fell in between. For all groups, the level of comfort was significantly higher, often by fifteen to twenty percentage points, both for waiting to vote and working as a poll worker when social distancing measures, such as space between voting booths, poll workers, and voters standing in line, were put in place to protect the public’s health. These findings show the paramount importance that California’s electorate places on social distancing measures for in-person voting in November, 2020, as well as how important it will be to educate the electorate about the social distancing measures put in place.

Figure 3. Level of Comfort at Polling Places with and without Social Distancing

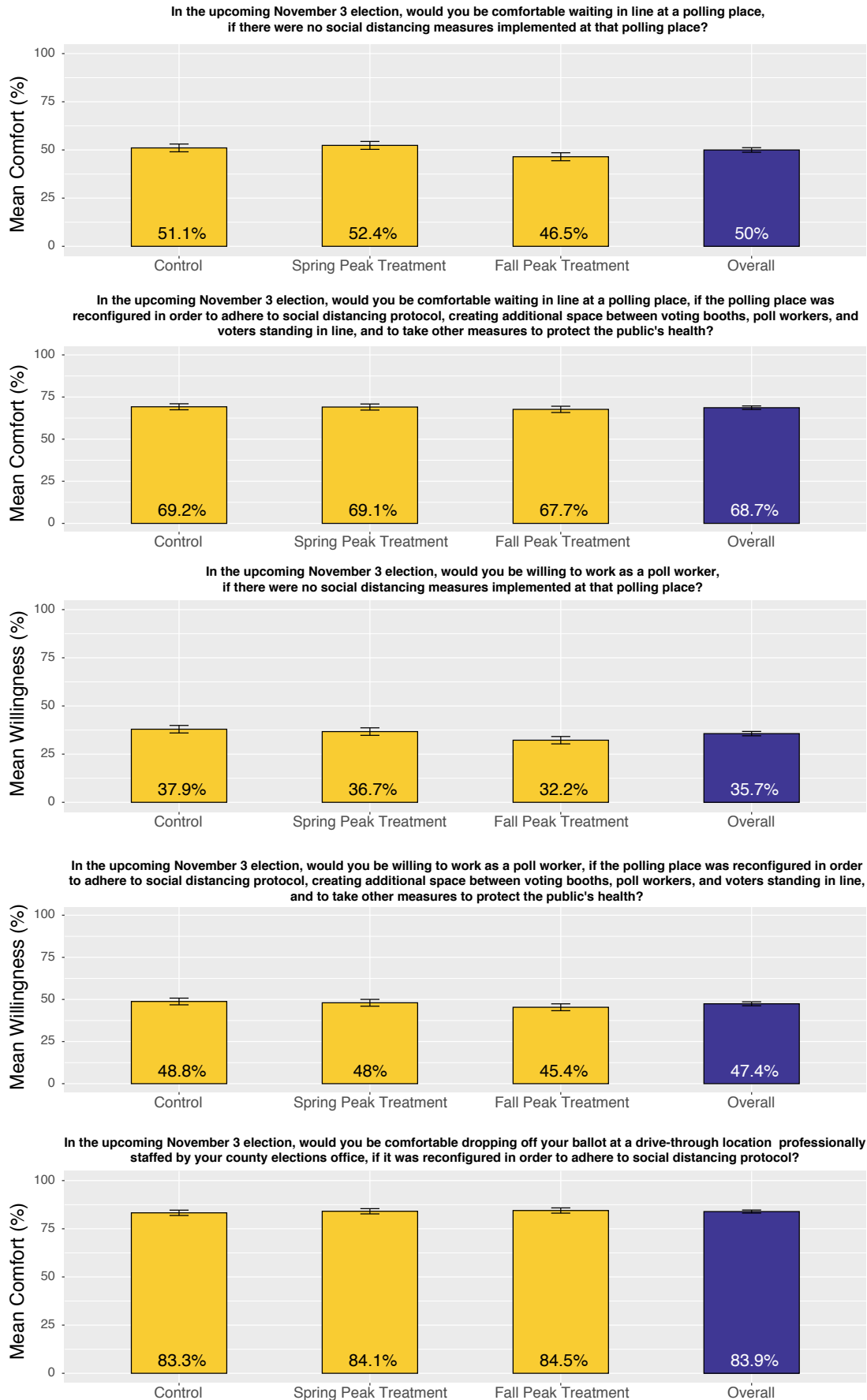
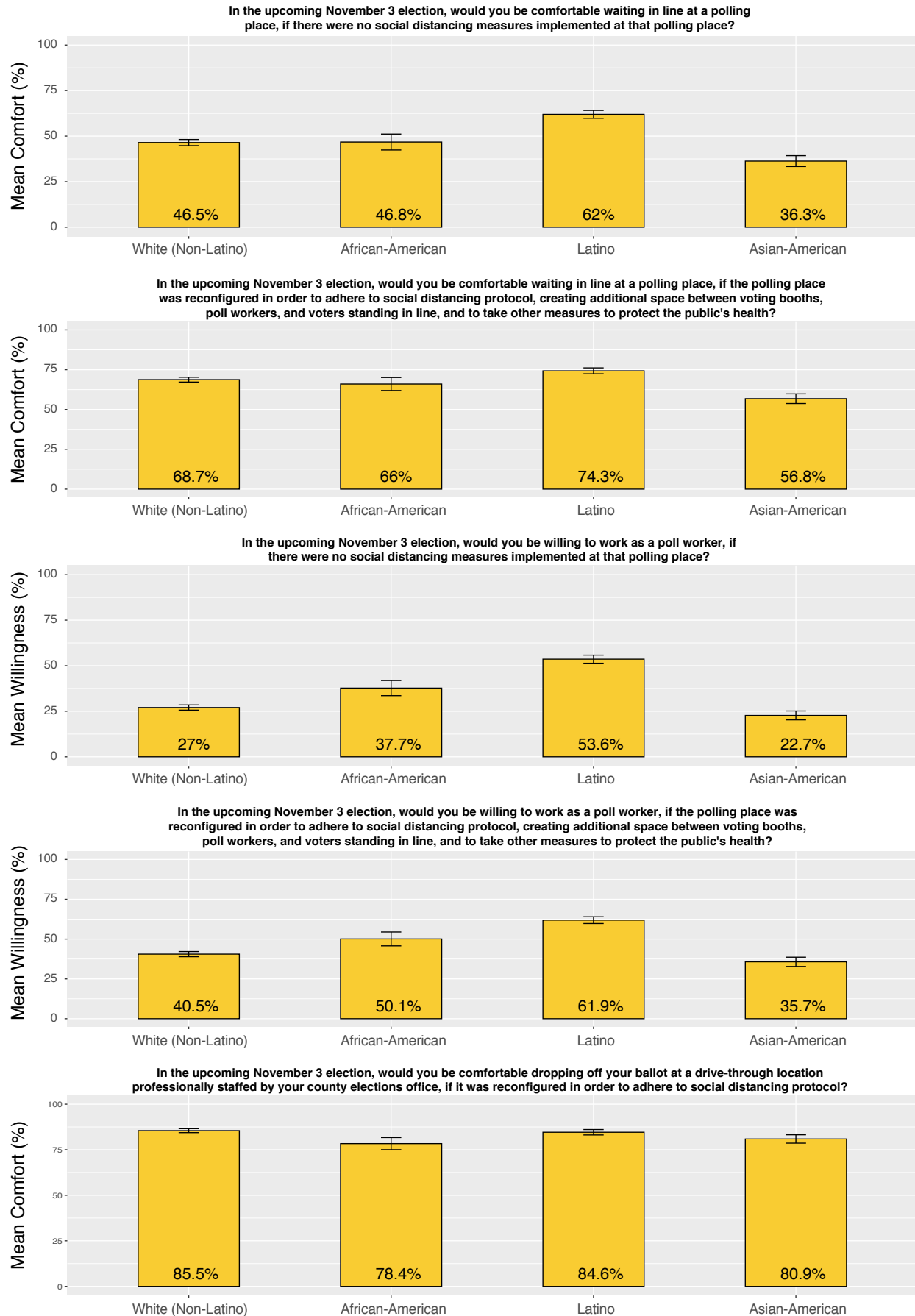


Figure 4. Comfort at Polling Places with and without Social Distancing, by Race/Ethnicity



WHAT METHODS MAKE CALIFORNIANS MOST CONFIDENT THAT BALLOTS WILL BE COUNTED CORRECTLY?

The two questions reported in Figure 5 ask eligible voters how confident they are that their own ballot and the ballots of others will be counted correctly if they are cast either by mail, at a polling place, or at a professionally-staffed vote center. Overall, 34.4% of Californians selected voting by mail as the method that gave them the most confidence that their own ballot would be counted correctly, and another 21.0% selected dropping off a mail ballot at a vote center or drop off box. Overall, 31.2% of respondents chose mailing in a ballot as the method of voting that provided the most confidence in the integrity of the election results, with an additional 20.5% saying that dropping off a ballot gave them the most confidence. These levels were similar for every COVID-19 scenario.

Figure 6 shows that there is one striking difference across demographic groups about which voting method gives them the most confidence. Significantly more Asian Americans (37.6%), African Americans (37.3%) and non-Latino whites (39.0%) selected voting by mail than Latinos (25.3%) as the method that gave them the most confidence their ballots would be counted correctly. Similarly, Latinos were significantly less likely than members of other groups to choose voting by mail as the method that gave them the most confidence in the integrity of election results.

Figure 5. Confidence that Ballots will be Counted Correctly

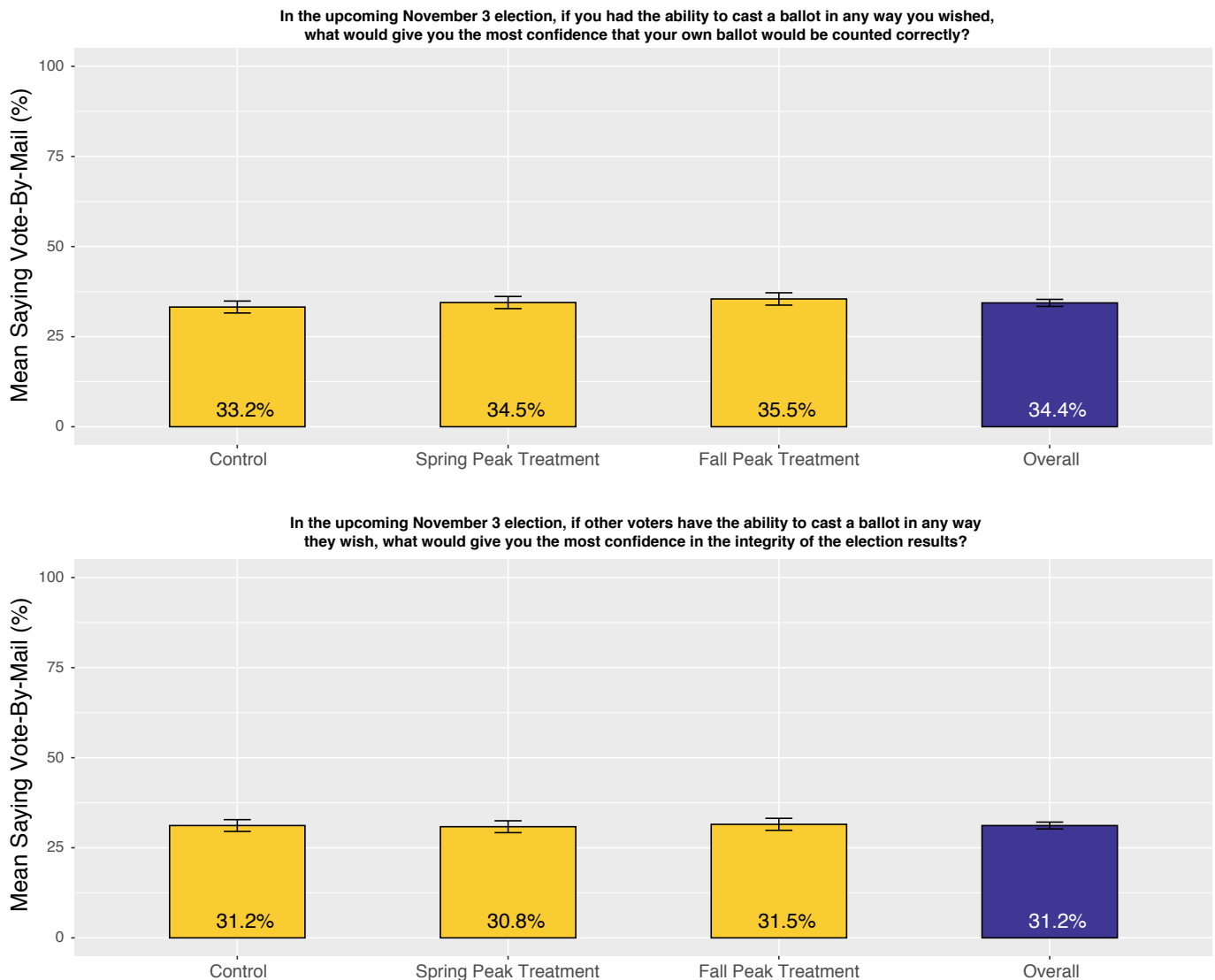
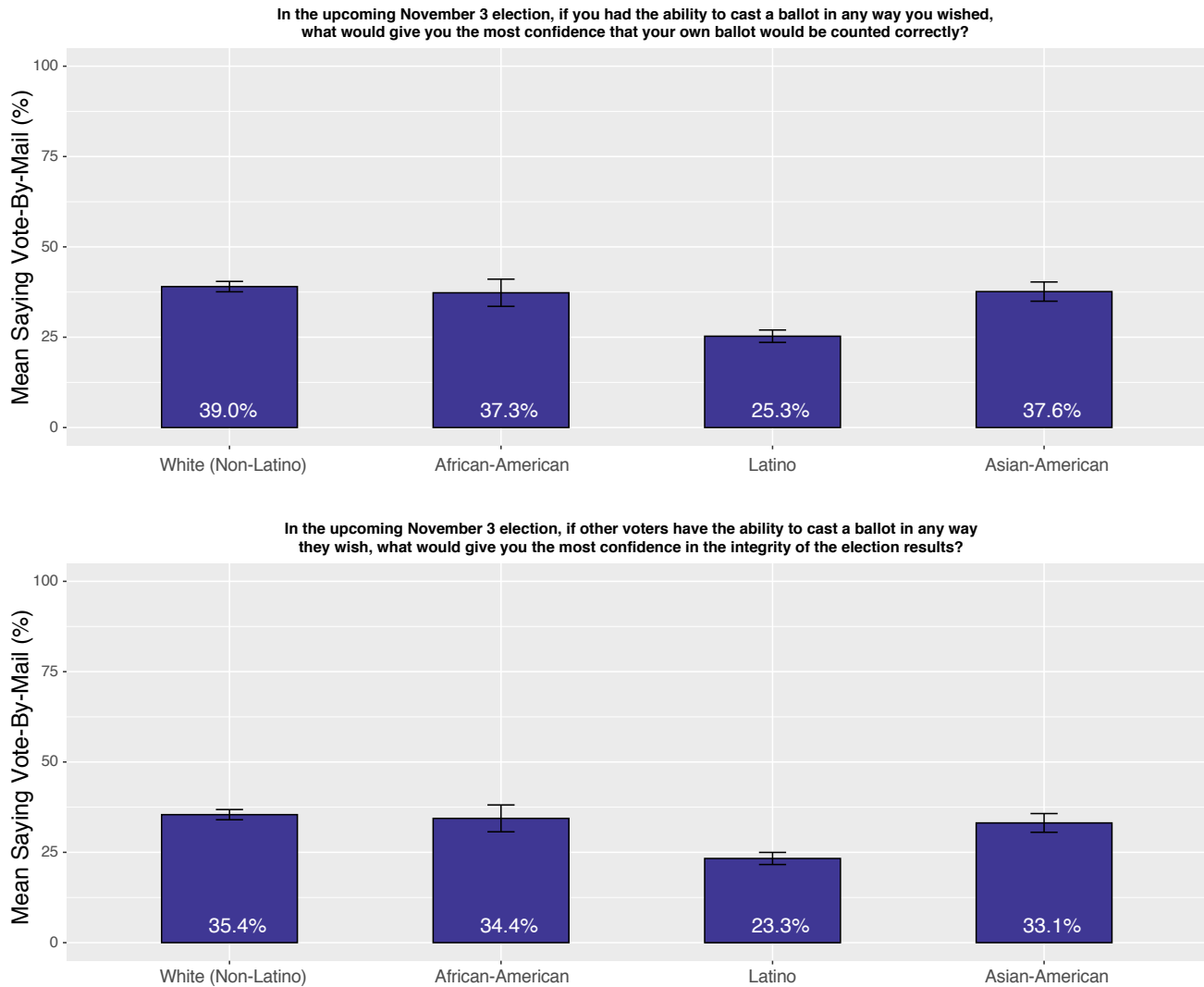


Figure 6. Confidence that Ballots will be Counted Correctly, by Race and Ethnicity



WHAT ELECTION POLICIES DO CALIFORNIANS SUPPORT IN A PANDEMIC?

Finally, we report how respondents viewed some of the major policy proposals that have been advanced at the national and state levels to increase opportunities to cast mail ballots in the November 2020 election. The first question asked whether they would support national legislation directing all states to send a mail ballot to any voter who requests one. While this “no-excuse absentee voting” policy has long been in place in California, voters in sixteen states must provide a valid excuse to vote absentee. Figure 7 demonstrates the strong consensus in favor of no-excuse absentee voting among Californians, with 83.2% supporting national legislation that would guarantee this opportunity to voters in every state. (For all of our policy questions, we calculate proportions based on “Yes” and “No” responses, removing “Unsure” responses.) Support for this policy was strong for voters in all COVID-19 scenarios, and none of those scenarios significantly impacted support for any of the policies. Overall, 72.3% of respondents taking a position favored a national law that would require states to send a mail ballot to every voter. And a strong majority of eligible California voters (66.8%) supported national legislation that would move the November 2020 election entirely to voting by mail, without having polling places or other in-person voting.

Figure 7. Policy Views on Voting by Mail

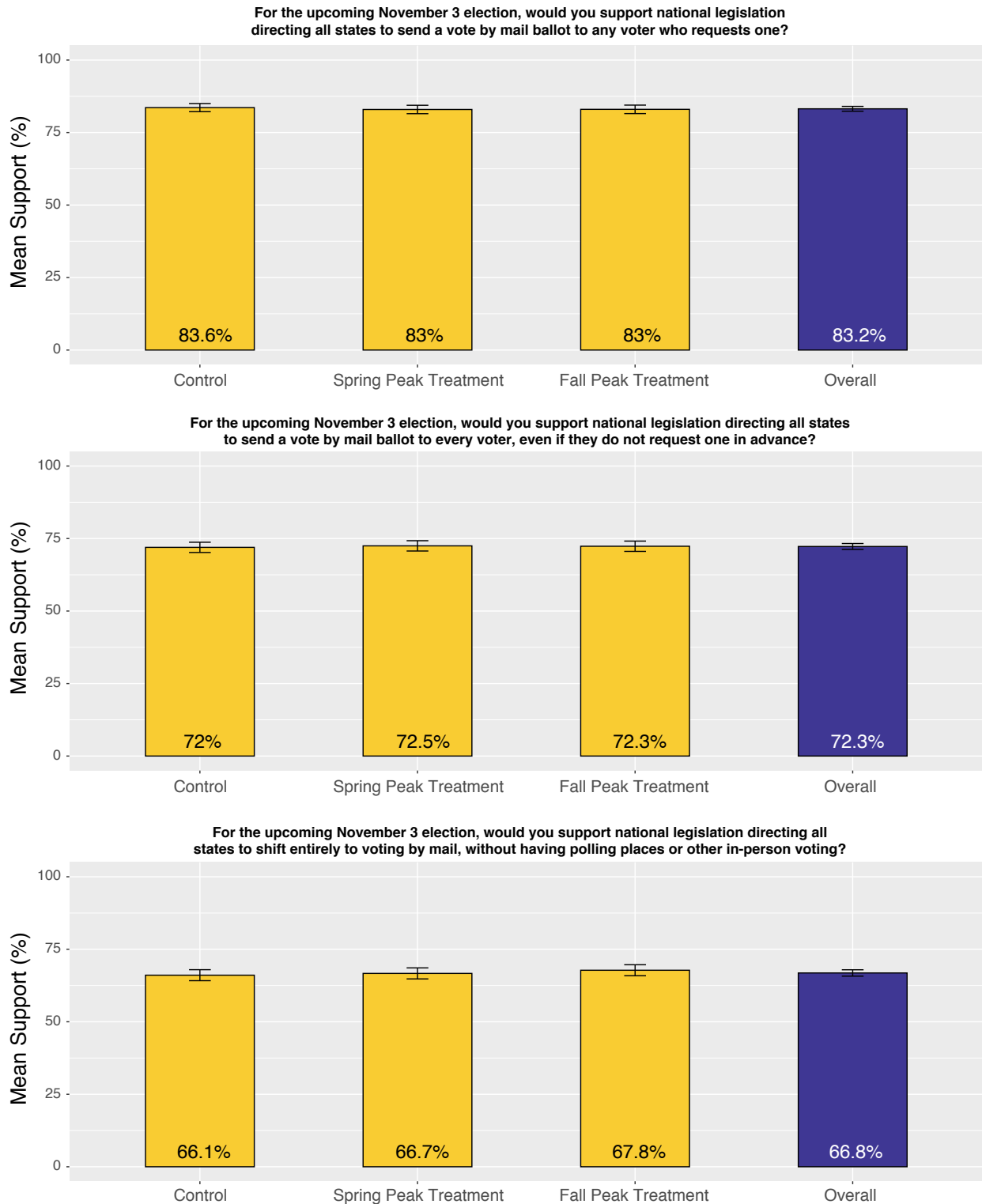
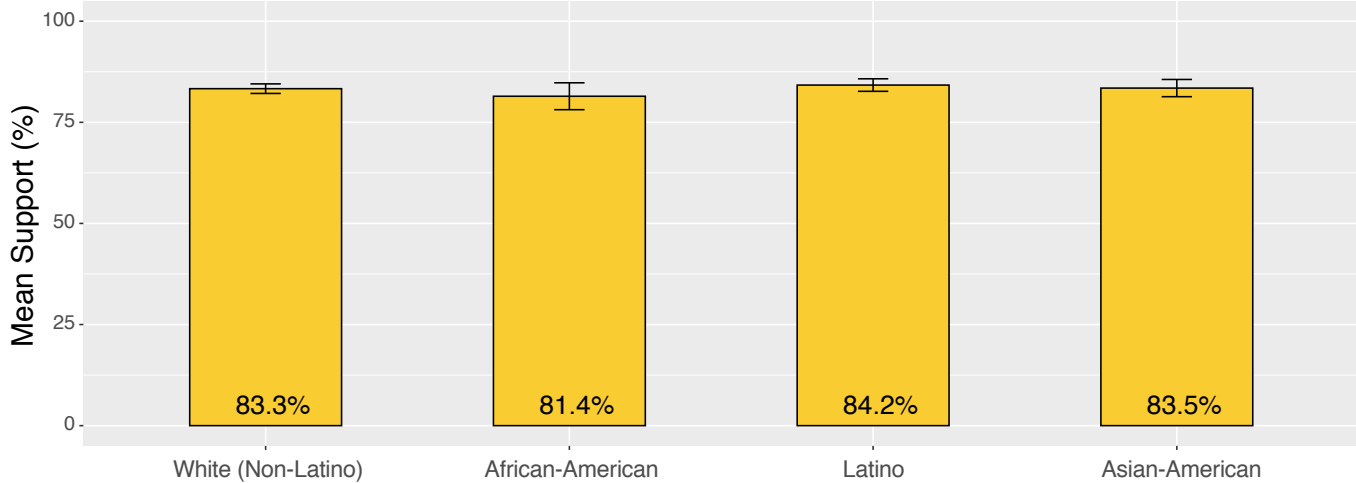


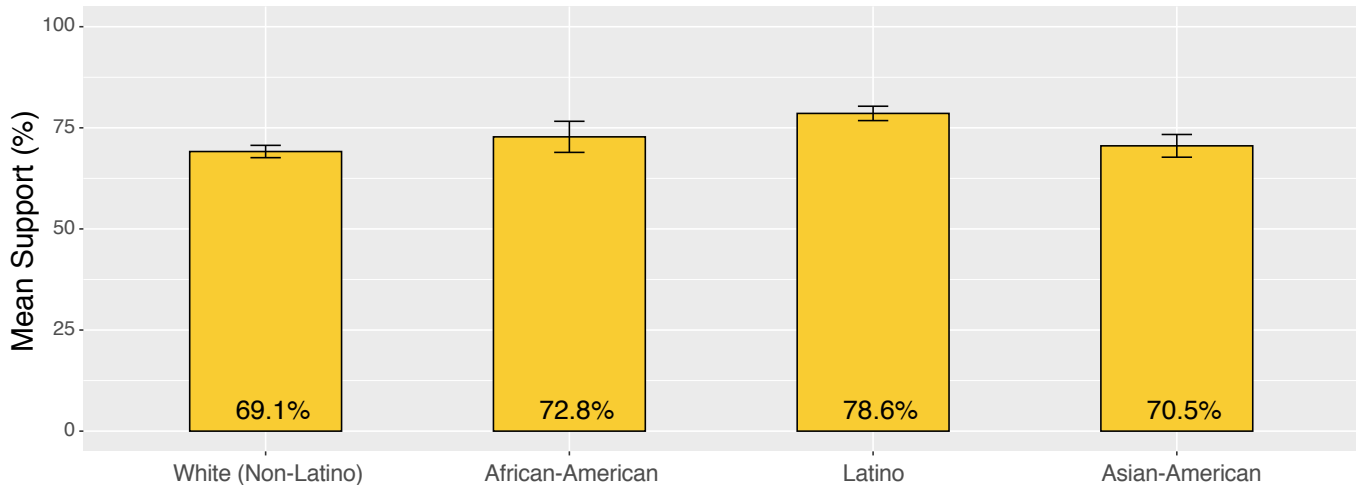
Figure 8 explores the demographic divides on these policy questions. Members of all racial and ethnic groups were strongly supportive of no-excuse absentee voting. On the question of whether to send a mail ballot to any voter who requests one, Latinos in California stood out as especially supportive of this policy, registering 78.6% support, which was six to nine percentage points higher than any other group. Finally, differences were also apparent regarding the question of moving elections entirely to vote by mail. Support for this proposal was lowest among non-Latino whites (62%), higher among African Americans (64.8%) and Asian Americans (70.5%), and highest among Latinos (73.2%).

Figure 8. Policy Views on Voting by Mail, by Race and Ethnicity

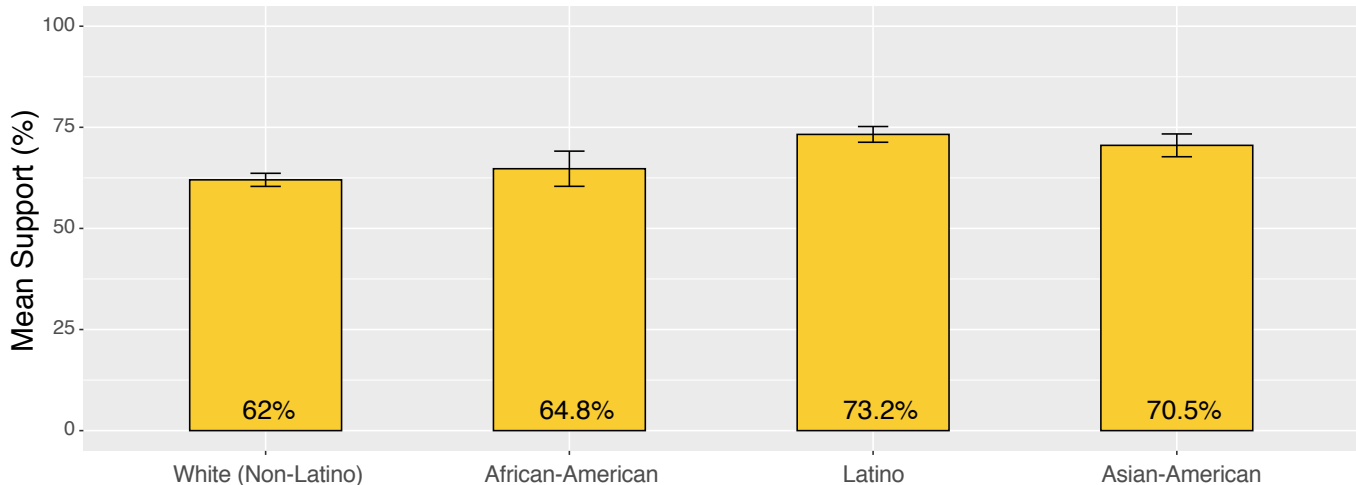
For the upcoming November 3 election, would you support national legislation directing all states to send a vote by mail ballot to any voter who requests one?



For the upcoming November 3 election, would you support national legislation directing all states to send a vote by mail ballot to every voter, even if they do not request one in advance?



For the upcoming November 3 election, would you support national legislation directing all states to shift entirely to voting by mail, without having polling places or other in-person voting?



CONCLUSIONS

Overall, a strong majority of California's eligible electorate would prefer to cast a ballot by mail in November's election, and this is the method of voting that gives them the most confidence that their ballot and the ballots of others will be counted correctly. Still, not all Californians favor this option – choices about how to cast ballots vary significantly across the diverse racial and ethnic groups in our electorate, and some voters say that they would not participate in the election if it is conducted either exclusively through the mail or exclusively through in-person options. When thinking about in-person voting experiences, voters who read scientific projections about a scenario in which the COVID-19 crisis peaks in the fall were especially uncomfortable at the prospect of waiting in line or working at a polling place. There were also significant differences by race and ethnicity in comfort levels, but voters of all types under all scenarios became much more comfortable with casting ballots in a polling place that adheres to social distancing protocols.

As policymakers and election officials plan to hold an election during an unprecedented public health challenge, the views of a representative sample of California's diverse electorate can help to guide their difficult choices. It is important to note that these are their survey responses, rather than measures of behavior, and whether the preferences that they expressed about how to cast ballots shapes their participation will be revealed in November, 2020.

About the New Electorate Project:

This project aims to provide rigorous evidence to evaluate how recent voting reforms in California are reshaping the state's electorate. In a series of studies, we ask how these reforms – including the Voter's Choice Act, the statewide move toward voting by mail in November 2020, shifts in the timing of local elections, and changes in voter registration – impact both overall turnout rates and the extent to which California's new electorate reflects and represents emerging demographic trends. We are conducting original academic research, but also summarizing our findings in research briefs tailored to policymakers, advocates, journalists, and interested members of the public. Our findings will be released to the public and available at newelectorateproject.org.

Funded by the University of California's Office of the President, this project brings together faculty members, graduate students and undergraduates at five UC campuses with collaborators at USC and the PPIC, along with two former lawmakers who now teach at UC San Diego. The project leaders are:

UC San Diego: Thad Kousser, Seth Hill, Denise Ducheny, Nathan Fletcher

UC Davis: Ben Highton, Cheryl Boudreau

UC Berkeley: Jack Citrin, Gabe Lenz

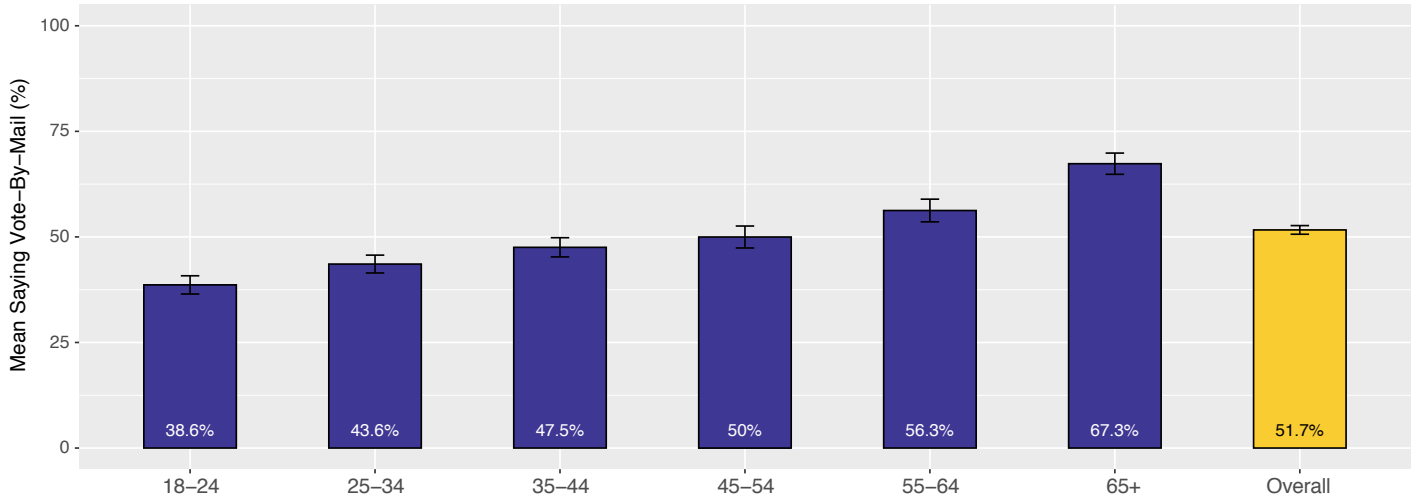
UC Riverside: Jenn Merolla, Dan Biggers

UC Merced: Jessica Trounstone

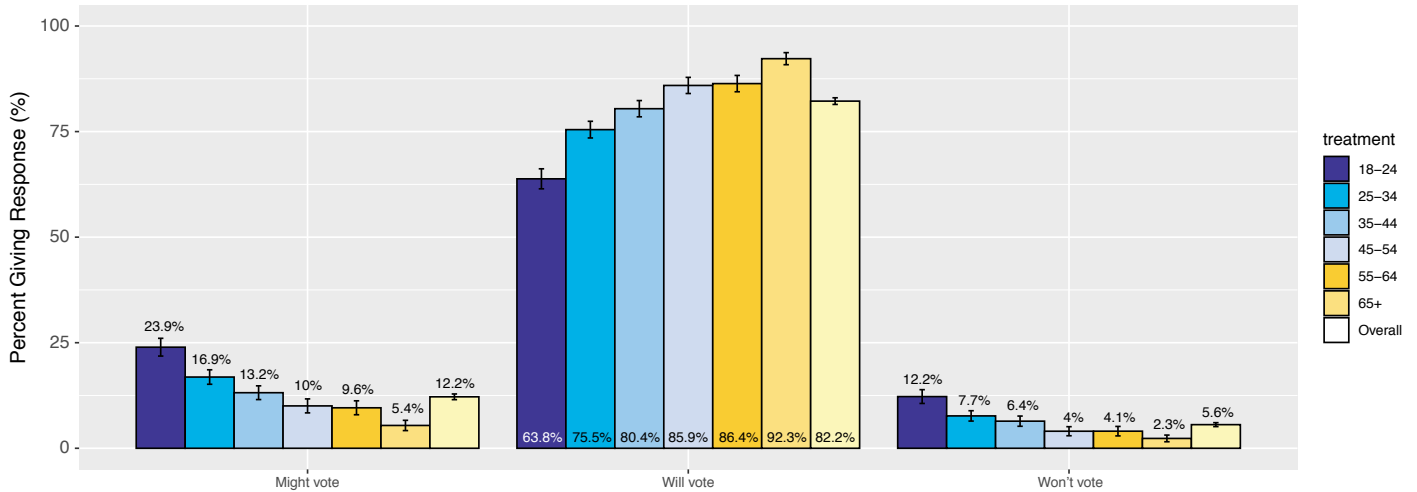
University of Southern California: Mindy Romero

Public Policy Institute of California: Eric McGhee

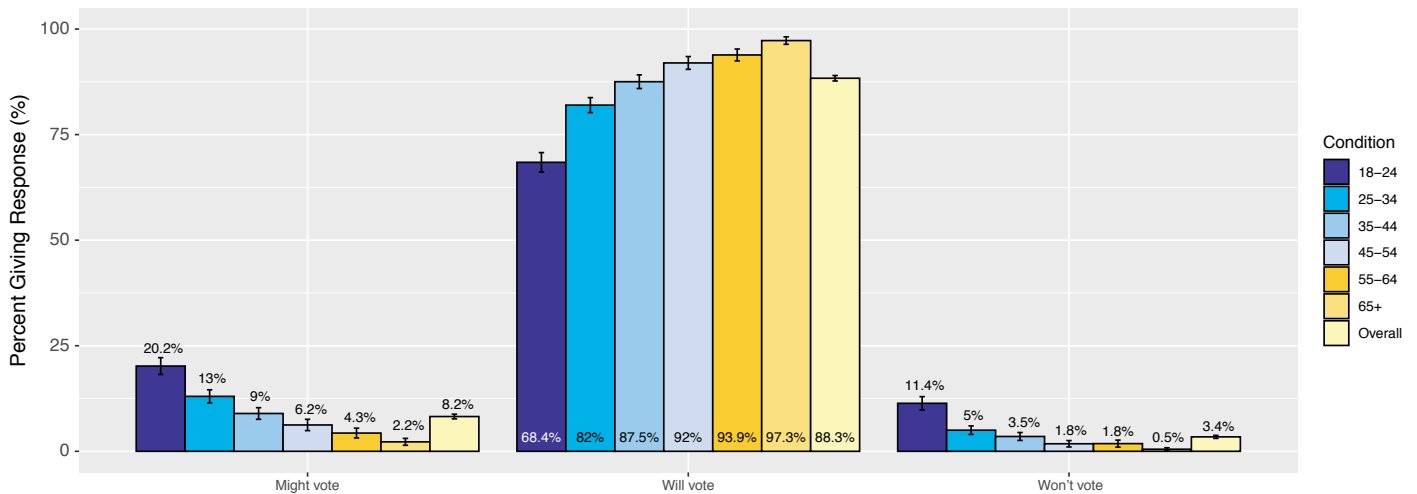
In the upcoming November 3 election, if you had the ability to cast a ballot in any way you wished, what would be your most preferred way to cast a ballot?



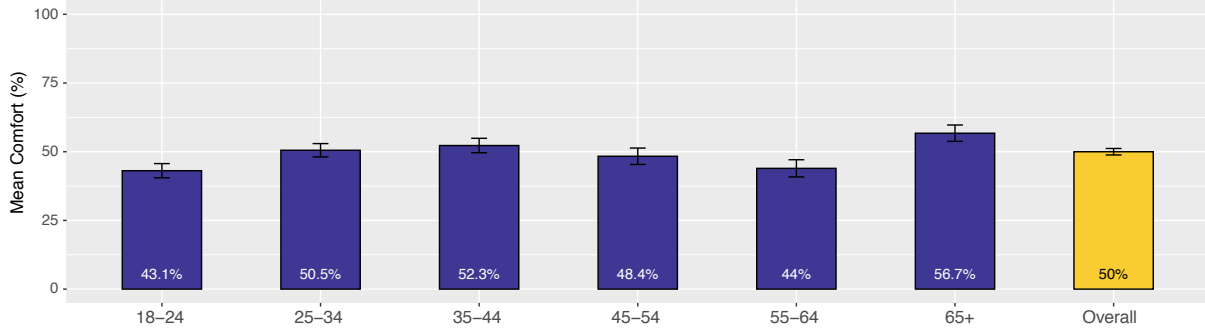
In the upcoming November 3 election, if your only option to cast a ballot in your county was an in-person option such as a traditional polling place or a professionally staffed county elections office, how likely would you be to cast a ballot?



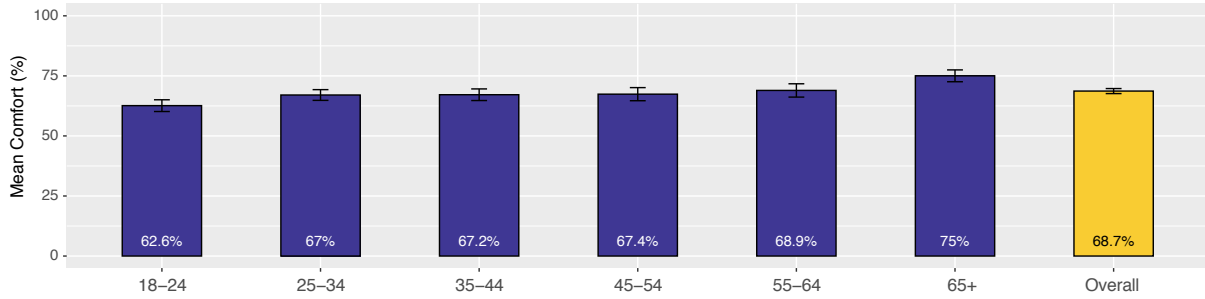
In the upcoming November 3 election, if your only option to cast a ballot in your county was to vote by mailing in a ballot, how likely would you be to cast a ballot?



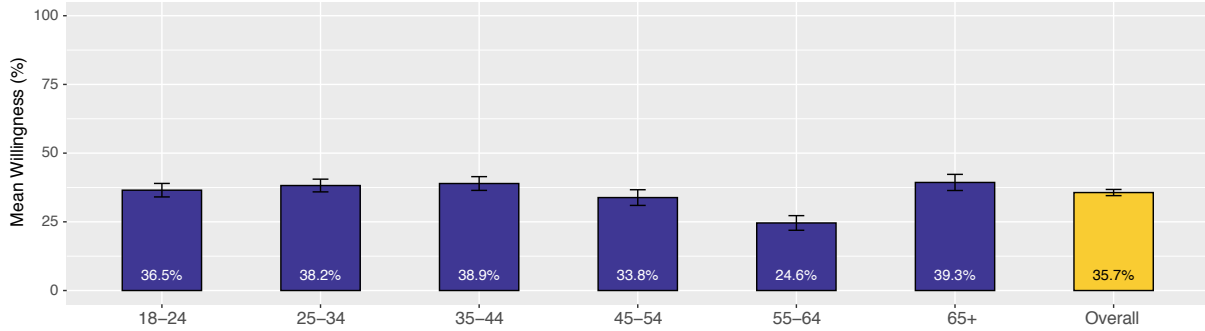
In the upcoming November 3 election, would you be comfortable waiting in line at a polling place, if there were no social distancing measures implemented at that polling place?



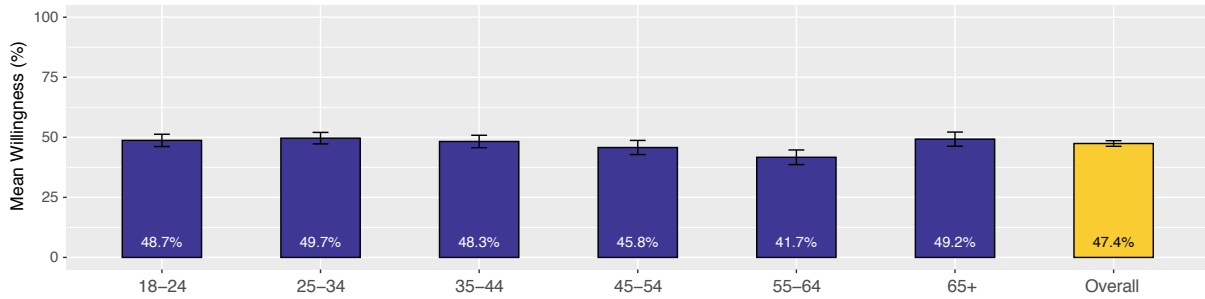
In the upcoming November 3 election, would you be comfortable waiting in line at a polling place, if the polling place was reconfigured in order to adhere to social distancing protocol, creating additional space between voting booths, poll workers, and voters standing in line, and to take other measures to protect the public's health?



In the upcoming November 3 election, would you be willing to work as a poll worker, if there were no social distancing measures implemented at that polling place?



In the upcoming November 3 election, would you be willing to work as a poll worker, if the polling place was reconfigured in order to adhere to social distancing protocol, creating additional space between voting booths, poll workers, and voters standing in line, and to take other measures to protect the public's health?



In the upcoming November 3 election, would you be comfortable dropping off your ballot at a drive-through location professionally staffed by your county elections office, if it was reconfigured in order to adhere to social distancing protocol?

