CHALLENGES OF VOTE-BY-MAIL

Charles Stewart III
MIT

National Conference of State Legislatures
August 7, 2019
Agenda

+ Growth of vote-by-mail
+ Flavors of vote-by-mail
+ Big considerations
  + Turnout
  + Confidence
+ More prosaic considerations
  + Complexity
  + Cost
  + Culture
+ Resources
Growth of vote-by-mail
Voting modes

%  

100

Election Day

80

Mail/absentee

60

Early in-person

40

20

0


Data source: Voting and Registration Supplement, Current Population Survey
Graph source: MIT Election Data and Science Lab
Voting modes

%  
100
80
60
40
20
0

Election Day
Mail/absentee
Early in-person


Data source: Voting and Registration Supplement, Current Population Survey
Graph source: MIT Election Data and Science Lab
Voting modes

%

- Election Day
- Mail/absentee
- Early in-person

Data source: Voting and Registration Supplement, Current Population Survey
Graph source: MIT Election Data and Science Lab
Voting modes

% of voters

- Election Day
- Mail/absentee
- Early in-person

Data source: Voting and Registration Supplement, Current Population Survey
Graph source: MIT Election Data and Science Lab
Data source: Voting and Registration Supplement, Current Population Survey
Graph source: MIT Election Data and Science Lab
2008

Data source: Voting and Registration Supplement, Current Population Survey
Graph source: MIT Election Data and Science Lab
Data source: Voting and Registration Supplement, Current Population Survey
Graph source: MIT Election Data and Science Lab
Data source: Voting and Registration Supplement, Current Population Survey
Graph source: MIT Election Data and Science Lab
Vote-by-mail flavors
How do mail-ballot laws influence use?

Data source: NCSL & Current Population Survey, 2018
Graph source: MIT Election Data and Science Lab
When do mail voters return ballots?

Graph source: MIT Election Data and Science Lab
When do mail voters return ballots?

Graph source: MIT Election Data and Science Lab
How do mail voters return ballots?

Graph source: MIT Election Data and Science Lab
BIG CONSIDERATIONS
Big considerations

+ Turnout
+ Confidence
+ Convenience
Turnout

+ Many advocate for liberalizing mail ballot laws to increase turnout
+ What does the careful academic research say?
Turnout

• Many advocate for liberalizing mail ballot laws to increase turnout
• What does the careful academic research say?
  • High profile elections: little effect, if any
Turnout

+ Many advocate for liberalizing mail ballot laws to increase turnout
+ What does the careful academic research say?
  + High profile elections: little effect, if any
  + Low profile elections: bigger effects
Confidence
Confidence

How confidence are you that your vote was counted as you intended?
Data source: Survey of the Performance of American Elections
Graph source: MIT Election Data and Science Lab
Data source: Survey of the Performance of American Elections
Graph source: MIT Election Data and Science Lab
**Very confident my vote was counted as cast (2016)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method of Voting</th>
<th>Confidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Voted in-person</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voted by mail, returned by mail</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voted by mail, returned in person</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
MORE PROSAIC CONSIDERATIONS
MORE PROSAIC CONSIDERATIONS

+ Complexity
+ Cost
+ Culture
Complexity

Data source: Voting and Registration Supplement, Current Population Survey
Graph source: MIT Election Data and Science Lab
Complexity

+ Expanding vote-by-mail opportunities is more than just taking the excuses off the absentee ballot form.
+ As the number of absentee ballots increase, so does the complexity of keeping track of all that paper.
Consider Colorado

+ Established Voter Service and Polling Centers
  + Register/update registration
  + Deal with ballot issues
  + Drop-off mailed ballots ballots
  + Vote in-person
+ Drop boxes
+ Ballot tracking
Cost

Certainly true that staffing neighborhood precincts is more expensive than mailing out ballots, returning them by mail, and counting them centrally.

Keep in mind that as mail ballots grow, demand for different services, with, will grow.
Resources

+ NCSL website:
  + Early and Absentee Voting
  + All-Mail Elections
+ National Vote at Home Institute
A secure and time-tested way to put voters first

Voters get their ballot delivered to them weeks before Election Day, fill it out at their convenience, then return it either in-person or by mail. The system has proven to be highly secure, and engages more voters, while significantly lowering costs.
www.voteathome.org

Charles Stewart III
Electionlab.mit.edu
CStewart@mit.edu
@CStewartIII