



Latino Voters and the 2020 Election Part 3: The Path to the Voting Booth

Overview

COVID-19 has disproportionately impacted the health and economic well-being of America's Latino* community, and its effects are already shaping Hispanic voter participation in the 2020 election.

Among Hispanics who are registered to vote, eight in 10 vote in presidential elections, and before the pandemic it was anticipated that more than 14 million Latinos would cast a ballot this year if previous citizenship, registration, and participation rates held.

The pandemic is exacerbating long-standing barriers to voting and creating new ones. Long before COVID-19, Latinos have experienced being the target of aggressive voter roll purges, exclusionary identification and witness requirements, targeted relocation or closing of polling places, longer lines at the polls, limited language access, and harassment. Adjustments being made to the election process in the context of the pandemic have already produced longer lines and more poll relocations, while many voter registration efforts and avenues were curtailed, and concerns about harassment are on the rise. As infections spike again, public education about alternatives to voting in person on Election Day has become critical to allowing registered voters to keep themselves and their families safe while affording them the opportunity to vote through other avenues. And all that is happening in a context of increased disinformation and attempts to delegitimize alternative voting methods.

* The terms "Hispanic" and "Latino" are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau and throughout this document to refer to persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, Dominican, Spanish, and other Hispanic descent; they may be of any race. This document may also refer to this population as "Latinx" to represent the diversity of gender identities and expressions that are present in the community.

This brief, the third of a three-part series, looks at trends in Latino voters' use of alternative voting methods, attitudes toward vote-by-mail (VBM) in light of the pandemic and attempts to seed distrust in that method, and vulnerabilities that must be addressed to ensure that every Latino voter is able to have their ballot counted and voice heard in 2020. Part one of the series covered the makeup, distribution, and participation trends of the Latino electorate, and part two looked at Latino voters' priority issues, their perspectives on parties and candidates and the traits they would like to see in a presidential candidate, and the levels of outreach they are experiencing.

Key points covered in this brief include:

- **For Latino voters, COVID-19 poses new barriers to voting while exacerbating long-standing ones.** With Latinos being overrepresented among both confirmed COVID-19 cases and the essential workforce, their risk of exposure and inability to take time off of work to vote—particularly given the hours-long lines expected at the polls—are significant factors that many Latinos are weighing as they try to balance voting and keeping their families safe and healthy.¹
- **Based on their experience at the polls, Latino voters are concerned about disenfranchisement.** Even before the pandemic, at least 60% had serious concerns about eligible voters being denied the right to vote, compared with only 27% of Whites.² Those concerns also extend to voting by mail.
- **Since 2012, Latinos have had the most rapid and consistent rate of growth in adoption of alternative voting methods.** In vote-by-mail and early voting, Latinos are outpacing other demographics, from midterm to midterm and presidential to presidential election cycles.
- **Eighty percent of Latinos favor states allowing all voters to vote by mail or absentee ballot,³** and the percent who felt confident about navigating the process to request a mail-in ballot reached 78% in late October. That said, among those who favor in-person voting, 55% said they were not familiar with the mail-in process in their state.⁴
- **Support for mail-in voting does not translate into full confidence in the system.** Perhaps shaped by the challenges they have experienced, only 31% of Hispanic voters had total confidence that mail-in ballots would be counted fairly and accurately (an additional 42% were “somewhat confident”).⁵ Thus, ensuring real access to various voting options remains critical for this electorate.
- **Risk of exposure to COVID-19 is one of the most significant variables influencing how Latinos plan to cast their ballot in 2020.** The safety, flexibility, and accessibility of mail-in voting resonate strongly with Latinos. At the same time, in addition to concerns over disenfranchisement, other factors such as misinformation, false narratives about fraudulent voting, and polarizing attempts to delegitimize mail-in voting have cast doubts over the trustworthiness of mail-in voting for many Latinos.



COVID-19 Impact on Casting a Ballot

In March 2020, COVID-19 was declared a national emergency, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued guidance prohibiting in-person gatherings of 50 or more for at least eight weeks.⁶ With primary elections already under way, many states were left with the difficult choice to either move forward with primary elections with last-minute social-distancing accommodations and limited personal protective equipment (PPE), or to postpone and reschedule primaries.⁷ As states scrambled to pandemic-proof their elections—many igniting partisan fights in the process—voters experienced the fallout.⁸ Lost ballots, voters in line at midnight,⁹ untrained and confused poll workers,¹⁰ and COVID-19 outbreaks,¹¹ the primary elections foreshadowed many of the challenges that voters continue to face now as the general election season unfolds.

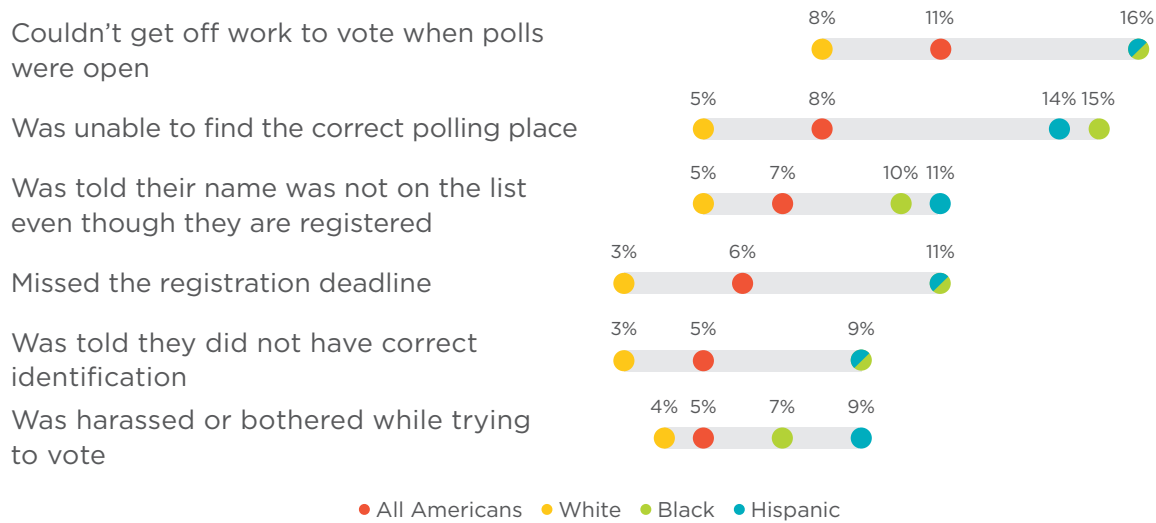
State and local election officials repeatedly called on Congress and the U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC) for additional funding and guidance to safely and securely administer 2020 elections, but only a small fraction of requested support was provided and no standard guidance issued. Thus, the burden of navigating already intricate and exacting voting laws and now-changing voting processes has disproportionately fallen on voters.¹² This burden is magnified for Latino voters, who are overrepresented among confirmed COVID-19 cases as well as the essential workforce. Their risk of

exposure and inability to take time off from work to vote—particularly given the hours-long lines expected at the polls—are significant factors that many Latinos are weighing as they try to balance their desire to vote and keeping themselves and their families safe and healthy.¹³

A 2018 study by PRRI (Public Religion Research Institute) and *The Atlantic* which surveyed voter experiences found that Black and Latino voters experienced more problems when trying to vote. For Latinos, the top problems were not being able to take time off from work during voting hours and inability to find the correct polling location—factors that are even more challenging in light of the pandemic¹⁴ (Figure 1). Further, Latino voters were twice as likely as White voters to be told their name was not on the rolls—even though they were registered—and to face harassment while trying to vote, and three times more likely than White voters to be told they did not have correct identification.¹⁵

Not surprisingly, these lived experiences are reflected in Latinos' perceptions of the current election system. The same study found that at least 60% of Latinos expressed serious concerns about eligible voters being denied the right to vote, compared with only 27% of Whites.¹⁶ Unfortunately, Latinos have not been immune to the spread of misinformation and false narratives about fraudulent voters—with 44% expressing concern compared with 34% of White Americans¹⁷—tropes that most often are used to disenfranchise eligible Hispanic voters.

Figure 1. Black and Hispanic Americans More Likely to Report Experiencing Problems at the Polls

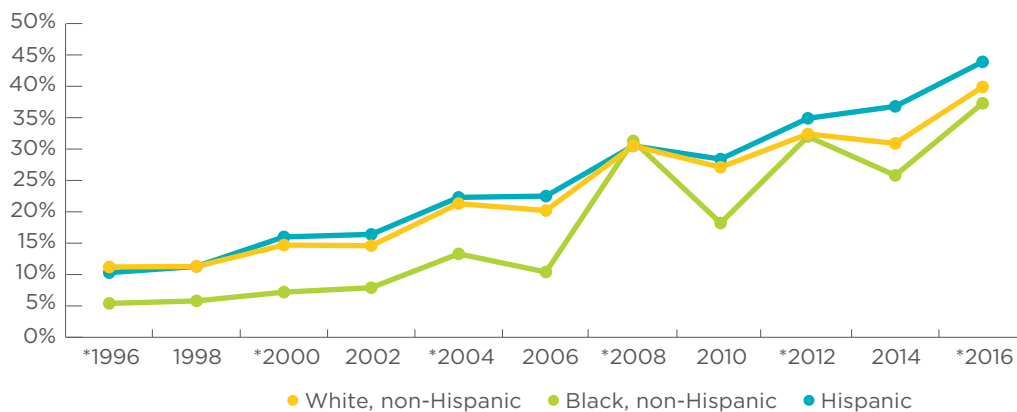


Source: PRRI/The Atlantic 2018 Voter Engagement Survey.

Trends in Alternative Voting

In the 2016 presidential election, four in 10 voters voted by mail or early in person, compared to 1996 when nine in 10 voters voted on Election Day.¹⁸ During that period, the percent of Hispanic voters using alternative voting methods was fairly comparable to White voters until 2012, when the percent of Hispanic voters using an alternative voting method outpaced that of White voters, reaching 44% in the 2016 presidential election (Figure 2).¹⁹ Moreover, while the 2018 midterms saw a nearly imperceptible change overall, 45% of Hispanic voters voted early or by mail, compared with 39% of White voters. Of the nearly five in 10 Latinos who chose an alternative method in 2018, 27% reported voting by mail and 18% early in person—the highest rates for either category, with each also making significant gains from the previous year.²⁰

Figure 2. Alternative Method of Voting, by Race and Hispanic Origin 1996 to 2016



* Presidential election year.

Note: Alternative method includes those who voted early and/or by absentee ballot. The estimates presented in this section are only for individuals with valid responses to both the method and timing questions.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 1996-2016.

Within alternative voting methods, all voters, including Latinos, have historically trended toward mail-in rather than early in-person voting. Early in-person voting first reached a double-digit share (14.3%) of voting options in 2008, nearly doubling from the previous presidential election, and almost evenly split with mail-in voting by 2016 (Table 1). The pandemic is likely to tilt the scales back toward mail-in voting. Among Hispanics, 74% of registered voters worried (38% strongly) that they might be exposed to coronavirus if they vote in person.²¹ As of October 20, among all voters, 72% of those who had voted early had done so by mail.²²

Table 1. Method of Voting: 1996–2016

Election Year	On Election Day*	Alternative Voting		
		Total	Before Election Day*	By Mail
2016 [†]	76%	26%	16%	28%
2014	74%	18%	23%	16%
2012 [†]	73%	16%	22%	20%
2010	61%	3%	2%	4%
2008 [†]	56%	9%	9%	9%
2006	54%	15%	9%	10%
2004 [†]	51%	6%	5%	4%
2002	41%	6%	11%	6%
2000 [†]	33%	1%	3%	2%
1998	41%	6%	11%	6%
1996 [†]	33%	1%	3%	2%

* Voted in person
[†] Presidential election year

Note: The estimates presented in this section are only for individuals with valid responses to the method and timing questions.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 1996-2016.

A July 2020 Human Rights Campaign Foundation (HRC Foundation) poll, in collaboration with UnidosUS, found that for the 2020 general election, 48% of Latino registered voters planned to vote by mail, 20% early in person, and 27% on Election Day²³ (Table 2). The number likely to vote by mail rose to 74% (51% very likely) if there is not yet a cure or vaccine for coronavirus. In an August poll by SOMOS and UnidosUS, the number saying they planned to vote by mail had risen to 55%. That number has decreased slightly: the NALEO Educational Fund weekly tracking poll of Latino voters still had 55% planning to vote by mail on September 8, but by October 21 that had decreased to 49%. Of those planning to vote in person, 40% planned to vote early.²⁴

While in August 70% of Latino registered voters said they felt confident about navigating the process to request a mail-in ballot, among those who favor in-person voting, 55% said they were not familiar with the process in their state.²⁵ There seems to be some progress on this front, with the number of Latino voters saying they knew how to request a ballot growing from 70% to 78% between mid-September and late October.²⁶

Table 2. “How do you plan on voting in the upcoming 2020 general election?”

	Total	Black	Latinx	AAPI	LGBTQ
Voting in person early, before Election Day	20%	22%	20%	12%	18%
Voting in person on Election Day	28%	30%	27%	23%	32%
Voting absentee by mail	48%	44%	48%	59%	43%
Other	2%	2%	2%	3%	2%
Will not vote	3%	2%	3%	3%	5%

Source: Human Rights Campaign Foundation, Latino Victory Foundation, NAACP, UnidosUS, and Woke Vote polling with HIT Strategies, June 29–July 10, 2020, “Vote by Mail Among Traditionally Marginalized Voters, National Online Survey.”

Attitudes Toward Voting By Mail

Latinos overwhelmingly support allowing voters to vote by mail. That support went from 77% in July to 81% in late October, among the highest when compared to other voters of color (Table 3). The HRC Foundation poll found that voters of color who planned to vote by mail had the same top three reasons in common: health and safety, flexibility, and accessibility (ranked in that order for all groups).²⁷

Table 3. “Would you favor or oppose allowing all voters the option to vote by mail or absentee ballot in this year’s presidential election?”

	Total	Black	Latinx	AAPI	LGBTQ
Strongly favor	54%	45%	63%	52%	64%
Somewhat favor	23%	25%	18%	32%	20%
Somewhat oppose	9%	11%	8%	7%	6%
Strongly oppose	8%	11%	8%	5%	5%
Don’t know/Ref	5%	7%	4%	4%	5%

Source: Human Rights Campaign Foundation, Latino Victory Foundation, NAACP, UnidosUS, and Woke Vote polling with HIT Strategies, June 29–July 10, 2020, “Vote by Mail Among Traditionally Marginalized Voters, National Online Survey.”

Support and ease in navigating the mail-in ballot process do not necessarily translate into trusting that process completely. The HRC Foundation poll found that only 31% of Hispanic voters had total confidence that mail-in ballots would be counted fairly and accurately (42% were “somewhat confident”).²⁸ In the SOMOS/UnidosUS poll, only 41% of Latino registered voters were “very confident” that a mail-in ballot would be returned and counted in the election (an additional 32% were “somewhat confident”).²⁹ In the NALEO tracking poll from October 21, only 30% completely trusted (and 37% mostly trusted) that their ballot would be correctly delivered back to the county elections department.³⁰ And those concerns are not unfounded. For example, research by University of Florida Professor Daniel A. Smith has found that “Hispanic and Black voters were more than twice as likely to have their ballot rejected as white voters in Florida’s 2018 general election” and that “people of color, younger voters and those who have never voted by mail are significantly more likely to have their ballots rejected, and that the inconsistent rejection rates within states suggest institutional issues are to blame, not voter error.”³¹



While voters of color polled identified the same reasons for being reluctant or opposed to VBM (votes being lost or not counted, increase in voter fraud, and possible extension of the ballot-counting process—in that order), Latinos expressed the highest concern about “people casting votes that should not be.”³² This specific kind of rhetoric falls in line with much of the coordinated misinformation campaigns that have run rampant throughout 2020, with some public officials and campaigns sounding the alarm around unfounded³³ and unsubstantiated³⁴ claims of voter fraud associated with VBM. These false narratives, combined with politicization³⁵ of the U.S. Postal Service, seek to exploit Latinos’ preexisting vulnerabilities with respect to VBM, reinforcing their fears. Interestingly, among the other groups polled, Latinos reported the highest rate of exposure to messages about VBM from President Trump, with 44% hearing very often and 18% somewhat often.

That said, for Latinos, voting remotely affords a chance to cast a vote free from the barriers and interference that many of these voters disproportionately experience at the polls and, importantly, overcome one of their top expressed challenges: inability to take time off from work to vote.³⁶ In the 2018 midterms, 29.9% of Latinos cited being too busy or having a conflicting schedule as the reason for not voting.³⁷ Indeed, increasing accessibility and convenience

have been chief among the motivations for calls to expand mail-in voting, which has also shown to result in increased voter turnout and promote habitual voting overall. As of the 2016 presidential and 2018 midterms, three states had universal mail-in voting: Colorado, Oregon, and Washington. A 2013 Washington state study puts forth some of the strongest evidence that mailing all registered voters a ballot increases turnout between two to four points, especially among low-propensity voters.³⁸ Likewise, a 2014 study of Colorado voters found that access to mail-in voting tripled the expected turnout rate for low-propensity voters.³⁹ More recently, studies of states that have implemented mail-in voting by county (and not yet fully adopted at the state level) present even more encouraging trends. During the 2016 election, 21 of Utah’s 29 counties conducted the presidential election by mail. It is worth noting that only 10 of the 21 counties had used mail-in voting during the 2014 midterm—meaning that 11 counties conducted the 2016 presidential election by mail for the first time. Still, voter turnout increased 8.7 points in mail-in counties versus those without vote by mail.⁴⁰ While Latinos make up a relatively small portion of the electorate in these states, this research coupled with historical trends of Latino ballot-casting might suggest meaningful gains in turnout associated with any expansion of mail-in voting.

Voting in Person

There are multiple unique factors—in addition to reticence to vote by mail among some—that may spur Latinos to vote in person. For example, voters in need of language assistance may prefer to navigate the process with the help of bilingual poll workers in person,⁴¹ while others may have missed the deadline⁴² to register or to request a mail ballot and thus need to use same-day registration and/or a provisional ballot (where available).⁴³ Voter confusion or lack of voter education around voting updates may also explain a preference to vote in person. In its first two installments, this series documented the anemic voter outreach and education that Latino voters receive from candidates, campaigns, and registration and Get-Out-The-Vote (GOTV) efforts. The same patterns hold true for education and information around voting processes. This issue has become amplified during the 2020 election cycle, where rushed program implementation, last-minute process updates, and eleventh-hour judicial orders have caused mass confusion and resulted in new forms of voter suppression.

Ultimately, voters prefer to have a choice. For example, 85% of Latino voters in Arizona, Florida, Colorado, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Texas agreed with the statement, “Whether I personally prefer to vote in person or vote by mail, that should be my choice and no one should deny me the right to vote by mail if I so choose.”⁴⁴ Similarly, 48% would prefer to vote in person if presented with either voting option.⁴⁵ It is also worth noting that more than one-third of Latinos in Arizona (37%), a state with more robust vote-by-mail participation, and Colorado (31%), which is all vote-by-mail, would prefer to vote in person.⁴⁶ Moreover, 58% of Latinos identified with voting-in-person as a statement about the community’s right to vote (compared with 71% of Black voters). And 65% of battleground state Latinos

agreed with the statement, “I prefer to vote in person because I believe my vote is more likely to be counted than if I vote by mail,”⁴⁷ yet again reflecting a sense of distrust and suspicion of the handling of mail-in ballots and election integrity generally. Compound this with the five barriers to polling-place voting disproportionately faced by Latinos, as noted above, the tensions that have sharply risen due to protests and civil unrest following the killing of George Floyd, and partisan calls for poll-watching armies⁴⁸—which heighten threats of harassment, intimidation, and renewed civil unrest—and the 2020 path to the ballot box looks especially arduous, even dangerous, for many Latino voters.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has created new impediments to voting and compounded preexisting vulnerabilities that have plagued the American electoral process. Multiple barriers lie on Latinos’ path to the voting booth, making the voting process difficult to navigate or even completely inaccessible for many. While polling indicates the likelihood of unprecedented levels of turnout this cycle, the fact that Latinos continue to face barriers to the ballot box at every stage in the voting process—from registration through ballot casting and counting—is simply unacceptable.

Each of these barriers is impacting the ways in which Latinos approach the ballot box and how they perceive access to and inclusion in our democracy. There is much work to be done to make the franchise universally accessible, and perhaps the pandemic revealing those vulnerabilities will lend greater momentum for real solutions, with far-reaching implications for the ways in which Latinos engage with the electoral process. Alongside their fellow Americans, Latinos merit equal and unimpeded access to their right to vote—and the functionality and success of American democracy depends on it.

Endnotes

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