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Voting by Mail by Race and Hispanic Ethnicity in Cuyahoga County

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July 17, 2020 (revised)

The current arguments to increase voting by mail rather than at the polls¹ may result in suppressing voting by Black and Hispanic voters unless outreach to those populations can increase their confidence in and preference for using the postal service to cast their votes in the 2020 general election and beyond. This is a particularly important in the coming election due to the likely exposure to COVID-19 at the polling places should the pandemic be still a significant health risk at places of congregation.

Methods

Using data from the Cuyahoga County Board of Elections, we located 2016 voters' addresses by 2010 census block and ascribed each voter the racial and ethnic populations' percentages in the block in the 2010 Census.² For example, a voter located in a census block consisting of 40% White, 50% Black, 10% other race, and 5% Hispanic/Latino³ voting age population was assigned those proportions (0.4, 0.5, 0.1, and 0.05).⁴ Summing the race and ethnic proportions for all voters by method of voting provides an estimate of the number of 2016 voters in each race/ethnicity category by voting method in the county.

This method ascribes race/ethnicity to individuals based on the composition of the immediate neighborhood of the resident and is more reliable in areas in which there is high racial/ethnic residential segregation.⁵ These estimates also describe the racial/ethnic neighborhoods in which voters live and their methods of voting; thus, the results can help address which neighborhoods are likely to need additional attention in promoting voting by mail.

Results

Table 1 provides a breakdown of estimated methods of voting in 2016 by race and Hispanic/Latino ethnicity in Cuyahoga County. It also provides the racial and ethnicity percentages of the voting age population.

¹ See "Opposing vote by mail is voter suppression: Opinion", by Penny M. Venetis, NJ.com, June 22, 2020. <https://www.nj.com/opinion/2020/06/opposing-voting-by-mail-is-voter-suppression-opinion.html>.

² Approximately 97% of voter addresses were successfully geocoded (located in a census block).

³ Hispanic/Latino ethnicity is separately enumerated from race in the census of population.

⁴ The "one race" categories were used. Only an estimated 2.3% of the county's population indicated multiple races in the Census Bureau's 2018 American Community Survey.

[\[https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/cuyahogacountyohio,US/PST045219\]](https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/cuyahogacountyohio,US/PST045219)

⁵ The method is subject to what geographers and other social scientists describe as the "ecological fallacy" in which individual characteristics in the population may not be well described by the geographic area's characteristics. However, the census block is a relatively very small area in urban areas and, with the degree of residential segregation in the county, it is argued here that it is a suitable method for estimation of race and Hispanic/Latino characteristics of the voters. The 2010 Black-White segregation index for the Cleveland-Elyria-Mentor metropolitan area was very high at 74.1, the 5th highest such index in the country. The White-Hispanic index was 52.3, the 20th highest. See William H. Frey, Brookings Institution and University of Michigan Social Science Data Analysis Network's analysis of 1990, 2000, and 2010 Census Decennial Census tract data.

[\[https://www.psc.isr.umich.edu/dis/census/segregation2010.html\]](https://www.psc.isr.umich.edu/dis/census/segregation2010.html)

Approximately 28% of the voting age population and 25.1% of voters in Cuyahoga County were African American. Hispanics/Latinos were 4.6% of the voting age population and 3.1% of voters in 2016. Among voters in the 2016 election, an estimated 31.8% used the mail to vote and 68.2% went to the polling places on election day instead.

However, percentages of persons voting in person versus by mail vary by race and Hispanic/Latino ancestry. A third (33.9%) of Asian voters (2.9% of the population) voted-by-mail (VBM). An estimated 34.4% of White voters voted by mail and 67.9% voted-in-person (VIP). Proportionally fewer Black voters than all voters, 24.7%, voted by mail. Among Hispanic voters, an estimated 26.4% used VBM. Compared to White voters and voters overall, the percentages for Black and Hispanic/Latino who voted by mail are significantly lower.⁶

Table 1: Estimated Race and Hispanic/Latino Ethnicity of 2016 Voters, Vote-in-Person and Vote-by-Mail; and Percent of Voting Age Population, 2016

	Total Votes	White	Black	American Indian	Asian	Other race groups	Hispanic/Latino
Percent VIP	68.2%	65.6%	75.3%	72.6%	66.1%	68.2%	73.6%
Percent VBM	31.8%	34.4%	24.7%	27.4%	33.9%	31.8%	26.4%
Percent of Votes		67.9%	25.1%	0.2%	2.4%	4.5%	3.1%
Percent of Voting Age Population, ACS 2016		66.0	28.0	0.3	2.9	2.8	4.6

Conclusions

The disparity among the willingness of voters to choose the VBM option in 2016 suggests that sole reliance on VBM in the upcoming election could discourage voter turnout among Black and Hispanic/Latino voters in the upcoming 2020 election. Vigorous efforts on two fronts may be required to avoid this result.

- Outreach to Black and Hispanic/Latino voters needs to increase their confidence in choosing the VBM option.
- Strict adherence to CDC guidelines at all polling places must be assured so that Black and Hispanic/Latino voters, already considered by the CDC as having greater risk of COVID-19 infection, will not face even greater risks by voting in person.

While a statewide analysis would be more definitive it is likely that similar efforts to both urge voters to vote by mail and to protect the health of voters who vote in person this November are needed.⁷

⁶ Difference among White, Black, and Hispanic/Latino voters are statistically different at the 99% confidence level.

⁷ Arguments to improve election safety include “How to Save Elections from a Pandemic”, by Eric Cortellessa, **Washington Monthly**, April/May/June 2020. [<https://washingtonmonthly.com/magazine/april-may-june-2020/how-to-save-elections-from-a-pandemic/>]